



THE BUFFALO BILL STORIES

A WEEKLY PUBLICATION
DEVOTED TO BORDER HISTORY

Issued Weekly. By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at New York Post Office by STREET & SMITH, 238 William St., N. Y.

No. 75.

Price, Five Cents.

BUFFALO BILL AND THE BLACK MASK

THE RAFFLE OF DEATH



BY
THE AUTHOR OF
'BUFFALO BILL'

THEN FOLLOWED THE GREATEST DUEL OF BUFFALO BILL'S CAREER, TILL THE LAST SHOT FROM THE SCOUT'S REVOLVER ENDED THE COMBAT.



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Price Five Cents.

Buffalo Bill and the Black Mask;

OR,

THE RAFFLE OF DEATH.

By the author of "BUFFALO BILL."

CHAPTER I.

THE TRAITOR'S DOOM.

"The verdict of your comrades is that you must die, and I therefore pronounce sentence of death upon you.

"The band will draw lots to see which three will get the red ivories that make them the executioners of these men, for in just one-half hour they are to die."

The one who uttered these words, sentencing three fellow-beings to death, was masked, not a feature of his face being visible.

The scene was a wild, picturesque one, in a canyon in the high rolling lands of far-away New Mexico.

It was night, and several bright fires of logs cast a ruddy light upon the over-hanging cliffs on all sides, on the cabins of an outlaw camp, and on the group of men gathered in a semi-circle, facing three prisoners who were in irons, hands and feet.

A score or more men were in the group. They were not masked, save perhaps that their faces were so

stamped with evil as to mask every good trait their natures had once possessed.

There were Mexican's there, swarthy half-breeds, a negro, two Indians, and specimens of the thorough American desperado, though the sons of the land beyond the Rio Grande predominated.

Another person was present besides those in the group and the trio of traitors—the man who had pronounced the death doom.

Two others were observers and listeners of what was taking place in that canyon camp, though their presence was never suspected by the outlaws grouped about the big log fire.

Over the cliff, a hundred feet above that canyon camp, peered strong, handsome, fearless faces—gazing down upon the scene, their ears alert to catch every word uttered.

They were beyond the arc of firelight, and so were secure from detection, though their faces were re-

vealed by the glow which glimmered upon the shoulder-straps of one, stamping him as an army officer, and upon the long hair, silken mustache and imperial of the other—the strikingly handsome face so well known now in the Old World as well as in America, as the Prince of the Plains, Buffalo Bill.

After hearing the words uttered by the masked chief in the canyon below, the two watchers stepped back from the cliff and glided away as silently as specters, while the outlaws prepared for the death scene.

The man who seemed to be leader had risen, entered the cabin near, and returned with a black box, a foot square, and with a hole in the top large enough to thrust the hand into.

Upon one side of the box were painted a white skull and crossbones, upon another a nest of green, writhing snakes, and on the third was a red coffin.

The fourth side was turned toward the outlaws and upon it were the words in red:

THE RAFFLE OF DEATH.

The man placed this box silently upon the table, and stood with one hand resting upon it.

Then one of the group advanced, put his hand into the opening in the top, and, drawing it out, handed something to the man.

He held it up to the gaze of all, uttering no word, and then motioned to the man to stand aside.

He had drawn a white ivory chip.

Another came up and drew, and he also took out a white chip.

Thus they came on, man after man, and drew in this Raffle of Death.

So far, though a dozen had drawn, each one had secured the white chip, which spared him from the executioner's duty.

There sat the three prisoners, silent, attentive, with lips quivering, but uttering no word for mercy.

It made the scene more sad and impressive to gaze into their pallid faces, yet hear no murmur, no appeal, no moan from their lips.

But, when the thirteenth man in the Raffle of Death had also drawn a white chip, they rose instinctively and went forward, to see, to wonder, to wait.

Could it be possible that the man, whose duty it was to put the white and red ivory chips in the box, had made a mistake and placed only the white ones there?

Or could it be that he had acted from a prompting of mercy and not placed a red chip in the box?

The doomed men knew their lives were hanging by a thread, for if a mistake was made they were saved.

This was the law of their lawless band. Whether from mercy or by a mistake, if the three red chips were left out, they would not forfeit their lives.

The rest of the band grew uneasy, for those three condemned men were traitors, and if set free might yet betray them.

Those who had not yet drawn, and they were now but few, grew nervous at the thought that they must draw the red chips if such were in the box.

They did not, bad as they were, desire to shoot a man down, as they would have to do, if it fell to their lot as executioners.

At last three only remained to draw, and they hung back until the chief impatiently commanded:

"Draw!"

One stepped forward and thrust his trembling hand into the box.

Withdrawing it, the man took it, and revealed a red chip.

The spell was broken; the three red chips must be in the box.

CHAPTER II.

THE RAFFLE OF DEATH.

There had been no mistake; the three red chips had been put in the box, and by a remarkable coincidence, they were the last to be drawn out.

They were taken out by the men to whose lot they fell, with pale faces, while the three doomed outlaws, dashed from hope to despair, dropped back upon their bench, white and quivering.

But they uttered no word, gave no moan of anguish at their terrible fate.

The chief, still impatient, apparently, at delay, said sternly:

"Come! There is no need of delaying longer. If you intend to pray, a short prayer will serve the purpose as well as a long one, and you but prolong your misery.

"Get ready, executioners, and let the work be done at once, for I am anxious to be off."

There was no remonstrance, but the leader walked up to the three doomed men and unlocked the irons upon their wrists and ankles.

There was no fear of escape, no dread of resistance. He said a few words to them in a low, soothing tone, and then grasped the hand of each.

Then one of the outlaws led them beneath a tree, where the firelight fell full upon them, and the three executioners stepped to a spot ten feet from them, and facing them.

The three executioners stood with their backs to the fire and eyes cast down.

The condemned stood with staring eyes, gazing upon the fire, the group of outlaws, and the chief, with a hapless look.

The center one of the three was a tall man, with a dark, evil face; Sol Nichols was his name. He it was who had led the party, five in all, in the act of treachery against the band—their crime being that they had, in disguise, held up and robbed a coach, killed the driver, and wounded an army officer, yet planned to keep what they had secured for themselves, and not to allow the chief and their comrades to know of their secret act of lawlessness.

"Have you any request to make, men?" called out the chief.

One had, he said. He would tell his executioner.

It was the tall man who spoke, and he said aloud:

"We are guilty, yes, and there were five of us.

"One was killed by Buffalo Bill in Herders' Ranch, one escaped, and we three are to die now; but, Captain Cobra, I warn you and your band, that the one who escaped, my brother, will fully and surely avenge my death.

"I have only a word of direction to give to the man there who sends me out of life, and I am ready."

His calm manner was worthy of one dying in a better cause—his fearlessness in the face of death worthy of a better life.

The executioner appointed to kill him stepped forward, the doomed man whispered a few words in his ear, and then the chief impatiently gave the word:

"Now let there be no further delay."

"All ready, senior," said the outlaw under-officer who had placed the men in position.

"Ready!"

The three executioners drew their revolvers at the command of Captain Cobra.

"Fire!"

Three weapons flashed together.

One of the three men fell heavily and lay motionless. A second uttered a cry and staggered back, un-

til the man who had fired upon him fired twice very rapidly; then he, too, fell.

The third sank upon his knees, and a second shot pierced his body when he was in that supplicating position.

But there was no cry for mercy from any of them.

"Lopez, you did your work well, for you killed Sol Nichols with one shot; the others were bunglers," said the chief, and, leaving the three men where they had fallen, he continued:

"Now, I wish to say to you that with Lem Nichols at large, the brother of that man whose threat you all just heard, we are no longer safe here, especially as the great scout, Buffalo Bill, has come to Fort Taos purposely to hunt us down.

"We will, therefore, break camp to-night, and disband until I call you together again; but when that will be I do not know.

"Now I shall go with a dozen men to strike one more blow, and then the Cobras are scattered until called again into the saddle."

He said no more, but soon after rode out of the canyon with a dozen men at his back.

The bodies of the three traitors had been left where they had fallen, for burial on the morrow, and lay there with the dying firelight casting flickering shadows about them.

An hour passed and the canyon was as still as the dead. The fire burned low and failed to cast more than a faint glow about it; but that glow was sufficient to show that one of the three bodies moved.

A head was raised, a white face glared over the scene; then the tall form of Sol Nichols arose and stole silently away in the shadows, gliding down the canyon in the direction of the corral where the horses of the band were kept.

Another of those five traitors had escaped death, and was at large.

Sol Nichols had escaped death and was to be his own avenger.

CHAPTER III.

THE SECRET CAMP.

Buffalo Bill was at Fort Taos at this time, partly by accident. He had been spending a furlough traveling in the Southwest, and incidentally doing some good in the way of fighting and running down outlaws wherever he met them.

He had visited Fort Taos in a social way, as he had many friends there, and had learned to his surprise that the Cobras, a band of outlaws, which he had broken up and dispersed when at the Fort six months before, had gathered again and broken out into fresh crimes.

With several officers he started out on a scout by night and witnessed the scene just described, but as he was not ready to attack the bandits, yet, not having sufficient force with him, he went back to the fort without letting them know that he had been nearby where they had held their meeting and the Raffle of Death, but he determined to go out on a lone scout against them the next day.

Buffalo Bill rode away from the fort the next morning, mounted upon his favorite horse Pard, and with a fine match for him, Comrade, serving as a pack animal.

The courtesies extended to a commissioned officer were given him, and he was followed by the cheers of the scouts and soldiers.

As he left Taos, he took the trail toward Santa Fe, but, after going a few miles, he turned squarely off to the left and began to flank around toward the Comanche country.

This way he kept up until he had gotten around to a point between Fort Taos and Herders' Ranch, the settlement in that part of the country where cattlemen, miners, the stage hands and storekeepers had congregated, with a large portion of the wildest kind of an element, gamblers and toughs, who hang about a frontier camp, for "The Ranch," as it was generally called, was nothing more than a camp of log cabins grouped about the Overland stage station.

To the southwest of the place where Buffalo Bill had camped lay Fort Summer, and thus he was the center of the triangle formed by the settlement and the two forts.

The country was rolling, well watered, heavily timbered in places, and grass grew abundantly, while game was plentiful and frequently lured the wily Comanches from their villages in the mountains to hunt there.

The stage trail to Fort Summer ran not very many miles from the scout's camp, and the stage trail to Fort Taos was about the same distance in another direction, with both posts and Herders' Ranch within half a day's hard ride of him.

The spot chosen for his secret camp was a canyon putting back from the river, and where there was

nothing to take any one unless it was a hunter looking for game.

It was in the spring of the year, and the nights were at times chilly, so the scout made a shelter for himself, gathered wood in plenty, and made himself comfortable in his lone camp, expecting that his stay would continue several weeks.

Though Lieutenant Willis, one of the officers at Fort Taos, had lately given the Comanches two severe whippings, Buffalo Bill was anxious to keep his eyes open for any move a band of braves might secretly make, so as to give warning in time.

He was about in the center of the country in which the outlaws had operated also, so he could see if any movements were on foot to reorganize the band for further lawless deeds.

There were but few persons to be made acquainted with the fact that Buffalo Bill had come to Fort Taos for more than a social visit or with any intention of hunting outlaws, these being the two fort commanders, Lieutenants Willis and Balfour, respectively at Taos and Summer, Scouts Brazos Ben and Dot Driver at Taos, Lem Luby, the driver of the coach to Summer; Ned Nordeck, driver of the weekly coach to Fort Taos, and Jack Tobin, the boss of Herders' Ranch, and who was stage agent, postmaster, landlord of the tavern, keeper of the bar and gambling den known as the Broadaxe Saloon, and who was known as Broadaxe Jack from the fact that he had once quelled a disturbance with a broadaxe, and afterward considered it his trademark.

Not very far from the scout's secret camp, and half a mile from the ford, which the trail between Taos and Herders' Ranch crossed, there was a mystery which he wished to solve.

It was the mystery of a grave.

Corralled by a band of Comanches one day, Buffalo Bill had found a safe retreat in an empty grave.

It was apparently newly dug, and here he had stood and fought until rescued by Lieutenant Willis and a party of troopers.

For whom the grave had been dug was a mystery, and the slain Comanches buried in it had been soon thrown out and the grave left as before.

Several times Buffalo Bill had placed in it logs and dirt, and each time all had been removed, until one day he had found a warning there that it was kept empty by an avenger who had dug it for one who had

wronged him, and for whom he was looking, to kill and bring there.

But there was the warning that it must not again be disturbed by the one who had several times done so.

It was in the hope of finding out who this avenger was that Buffalo Bill had camped near enough to visit the grave and thus keep watch.

Having spent a day idly in camp, Buffalo Bill decided to go on foot to the empty grave the next morning, fill it in with logs and dirt, and then return by night to keep watch.

The grave was located upon the riverbank, in a grove of timber, and overlooking a small valley.

When he arrived there Buffalo Bill found it empty.

Several logs and a quantity of dirt were thrown into it, and then the scout started back for his camp.

Late in the afternoon he led his horses to water, staked them out in a good pasturage, and set off for the grave, armed with his rifle, belt of arms, lariat, and a blanket.

He arrived there soon after sunset, and, to his surprise, found that it was empty again.

Disappointed, he filled it in once more, and then lay down near it to watch.

The night passed, and no one came.

He waited until nearly noon, and, knowing that his horses demanded his care, he returned to his camp, but was back again at the grave within three hours.

Again it was empty.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER.

The coach to Taos arrived on time at Herders' Ranch that day, and one passenger was on the box with Ned Nordeck, the driver, and dismounted to enjoy one of the good meals which Broadaxe Jack's tavern was noted for.

He was a man not of the Far West, it was certain, but tall, well formed, and distinguished looking.

His face was a fine one, yet was marred by a cynical look hovering about the mouth that at times was bitter and cruel, so intense it became.

Well dressed, he looked like a Southern planter, and Ned Nordeck said that he was down on the books as

DR. EDGAR DRAYTON,

Alabama.

Ned Nordeck further stated that the stranger talked

well, was apparently a rich man, and stated that he came West on a special mission, but what that was the passenger did not say.

The stranger took out a well-filled pocketbook to pay for his meal, lighted a fragrant cigar and handed one to Ned, and then mounted the box again, and the coach rolled on, six fresh horses having replaced the tired ones.

The traveler seemed much interested in the country and its people, and asked many questions about the dwellers in that remote land, suddenly making the query:

"Do you know a man here by the name of Tyler Tatnal, driver?"

"I doesn't, by that name; but what does he call himself out in these parts?"

"I know of no other name that he has."

"I guess he don't hang out around here."

"Yes, he does."

"Never heard of him; but maybe some one at the Fort can tell you, for he might be a soldier."

"He is no soldier."

"What does he do?"

"Nothing, that I know of, for he is rich."

"The only rich man I knows of, save several officers at the Fort, that is, who has money without working for it, is Taylor Travis."

"Who is he?"

"A young ranchero south of Herders' Ranch. He has a large ranch, plenty of cattle, and money to throw to the birds."

"Taylor Travis, you say his name?"

"Yes, sir."

"Describe him, please."

"He is what some folks call a pretty man, but he's not one to fool with, though he's powerful handsome, and all the ranch girls is dead gone on him, though he gambles and is a little rapid, they say.

"But he can throw a lariat with any Mexican, out-ride a Comanche, and shoot with any Texan; in fact, he is a Texan."

"He is not the man, for the one I speak of is about my age, forty, and is, or was, a handsome, polished gentleman."

"He don't hang out here, as I told you."

"We shall see, for, though I booked with you to Taos, I expect to meet him somewhere upon the road between here and the fort."

Ned Nordeck looked at the passenger suspiciously

He had known of well-dressed men who had been passengers on coaches, who had met friends on the trail who had proven to be outlaws, and, after robbing the stage, had quietly disappeared.

Could it be that this fine-looking gentleman was a road-agent in disguise?

Ned hoped not, for he had along quite a valuable freight for Fort Taos.

Determined to watch his passenger closely, Ned drove along, leading him to talk, yet getting nothing from him that would in any way cast suspicion upon him of being other than he appeared—a gentleman.

But the more Ned studied his face with sly glances, the more he disliked that cynical look on the man's face.

"Were you ever out West before?" Ned asked.

"Never."

"Expect to settle here?"

"I may."

"You may live here, then?"

"I may die here."

"Yer may, if ther road-agents holds us up or yer is suffering from heart trouble."

"I am in perfect health now, but there is no telling how long before I have heart trouble, while, as for road-agents, I have but a few hundreds and some jewelry with me, hardly enough to tempt your robbers of New Mexico, from what I hear of them."

"Maybe you have friends at the Fort?"

"Not that I am aware of."

"Interested in mining, maybe?"

"Not in the least."

"Going to cattle raising?"

"No."

"Another store in Herders' Ranch would pay, for the place is growing."

"There is room for it; but I shall not open a store."

"Going to remain long?"

"I may go back with you, or I may, as I said, die here."

"I shall start back in two days."

"I will be ready any time, if I am alive."

Ned Nordeck did not like the stress the stranger put upon the possibility of his dying out West; it seemed to smack of trouble.

But he drove on, and as his passenger had relapsed into silence, he could only watch him closely, and he saw that he was constantly watching the trail ahead on both sides.

Suddenly, just after the coach had crossed the river ford, loud came the command:

"Halt!"

"I've business with that coach!"

CHAPTER V.

THE MASKED MAN IN BLACK.

Ned Nordeck drew rein involuntarily, for he had lived long enough on the frontier to know what just such a summons meant.

He was well aware that if he did not obey the command a bullet through the head or heart would put an end to his usefulness in this vale of tears.

So he drew rein, casting a reproachful look at his passenger, as though to say:

"I knew it, and you such a nice gentleman, too."

Then Ned looked for the Cobras to appear, from five to fifteen in number.

Instead, a man stepped from the thicket alone.

To the surprise of Ned Nordeck, he was dressed in a suit of black, frock coat, pants, and slouch hat, all of the same somber hue.

And, more, he wore a black mask that completely hid his face, and even neck, while his hands were encased in black kid gloves.

Ned was surprised, but he made no effort to drive on, for the masked man in black carried a rifle across one arm, and had a belt of arms strapped around his waist.

Advancing to the heads of the leaders, he called out:

"Do not be alarmed, Ned Nordeck, that you may lose your gold or freight, for I am no trail thief.

"My business is with that gentleman."

"You mean to say you will rob him, but not the coach?" said Ned, in amazement.

"I did not say that I would rob him, I remarked that my business was with him, not you."

Ned Nordeck glanced toward his passenger.

There was no change in his face, unless it was that the cynical look had increased to one that was cruel.

He was smoking one of his fragrant cigars, and taking it from his lips, affirmed rather than asked:

"You are Tyler Tatnal?"

"Yes."

"And you are Dr. Edgar Drayton?"

"I am."

"You received my communication?"

"My being here is proof of it."

"You did not come as at first I expected."

"I was necessarily detained, as I wrote you."

"Are you alone?"

"Save for this gentleman on the box with me."

"You understand all that your coming means?"

"I do."

"And come prepared as I demanded in my first letter to you?"

"I do."

"Very well. I am ready."

Ned Nordeck had listened with deepest interest to every word uttered by the two men.

What could it mean?

The passenger on the box with him was calm, still smoked his cigar, but the look on his face deepened with cruelty.

The other had now approached the coach and stood by the side of the off wheeler.

Ned was confident now that he was alone, and seemed half tempted to draw his revolver and open upon him.

But he wished to see what the end of this strange meeting would be.

So he calmly watched and awaited developments.

When the masked man in black said that he was ready, the passenger turned to Ned, and said, courteously:

"I have here a wallet, in which are my name and address, and a letter already written and directed, as well as stamped, for I prepared for this meeting."

"Yes, pard."

"There are several hundred dollars in the wallet which you can keep, or turn over to any one more needy than yourself."

"Guess I can find poor fellows ter help along, for I'm not suffering, pard, though I thanks you."

"As you please, but the money is yours, only send the letter as addressed, should anything happen to me, for this gentleman, who, for some reason best known to himself, has masked his face, has a grievance to settle with me."

"It's a fight, pard?"

"Yes, you might call it so, but I regard it as a duel to the death, for I have come many a long mile to meet this gentleman, at his demand by letter, and he has been waiting for me for quite a time."

"But I am here at last, so he will not be disappointed."

"Is you going to fight here?"

"Yes; I believe he so wishes."

"I do," said the masked man in black.

"Say. Pard. Afraid-to-show-ye'r-face, who be you, anyhow?" asked Ned, suddenly.

"That is my own affair. Had I not wished to remain unknown I should not have worn this mask," was the stern reply.

"He is the gentleman I asked you about and his name is Tyler Tatnal," said Drayton.

"That's his name, is it?"

"Yes."

"I doesn't know him by that handle, but ef I could pull that mask off I'd know him maybe."

"To attempt it would be to throw your life away."

"I'm too old to be doing fool things on account of curiosity, so don't get scared."

"Are you ready, Dr. Drayton?" impatiently said the masked man.

"Oh, yes," and Dr. Drayton leaped to the ground, but said:

"You, my friend, will see fair play in this duel?"

"You bet I will, and I means it," and wrapping his reins around his lantern, Ned Nordeck also leaped to the ground.

CHAPTER VI.

TO FIGHT TO THE DEATH.

"There will be fair play, never fear," said the masked man, quietly, as Ned leaped from the box.

"I desire to see the face of the man I am to fight," said Dr. Drayton, advancing toward his adversary.

"I will not unmask before Ned Nordeck, for I wish to remain unknown in this affair; but I will turn my back on him and allow you to see my face."

"That will satisfy me, for I neither wish to kill or be killed by the wrong man."

The man in black replied:

"There is no mistake, as you will see. Each of us knows the game he seeks. See!" He had turned his back upon Nordeck, and then raised his mask so that Dr. Drayton could see his face.

For fully a quarter of a minute—it seemed much longer to Ned Nordeck—the two men gazed into each other's faces.

Each man seemed to read in the look of the other all there was of hatred, to review the past, while beholding the countenance of the other, and to feel that whatever

the cause that brought about that strange meeting in far-away New Mexico, there was a certainty that both men were in deadly earnest—that only one must leave the spot alive.

"Come, gents, I've got ter hump ahead, and though you may be anxious ter live as long as you can, I've the schedule time ter run on, when ther Cobras don't break in upon me, though, being as I hain't held up ter be robbed this time, I can give yer a few minutes."

"We will not delay you long, Nordeck. As you are to be witness, see that each of us gains no advantage. What will be your weapon, Dr. Drayton?"

"A revolver."

"That will suit me, though weapons are immaterial to me, whether rifles, revolvers or knives."

"This is no butchery, and I have not lived in the Wild West long enough to accustom myself to knife encounters," replied Dr. Drayton, with a sneer.

"Revolvers, then, are the weapons. Can I offer you a choice of my revolvers, that are tried and true?"

"Thank you, no; for I came provided," and, stepping to the coach, he took out a gripsack, opened it, and selected one of two revolvers that were there, remarking quietly:

"I have novels here I brought to read on the way. If I fall, take them, for they may interest you."

"Thank you, I will, and shall enjoy them, as my library out here is limited."

"If you live—yes."

"Who knows?"

"But a few minutes will tell. Ned Nordeck, step off ten paces, for I suppose that distance will suit you, doctor?"

"Oh, yes."

"And you will give the word, Nordeck, as follows: 'Are you ready? Fire! One, two, three!'"

"We are to fire between the words 'fire' and 'three,' but should either one of us draw trigger before the word fire, you are at liberty to shoot him down."

"Does that suit you, doctor?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Tatnal."

"See here, gents! I don't know as I'm doing the square thing to let this fight take place here on the trail," urged Ned Nordeck, suddenly.

"And see here, Ned Nordeck, if you attempt in any way to interfere, I will send a bullet through your brain," sternly said the Masked Man in Black.

Ned was not disturbed by this threat, but replied:

"I don't know whether you will or not, for we are two ag'in you."

"If you are counting me as one, friend Nordeck, you make a mistake, for I would take no underhand advantage of this gentleman," quickly said Dr. Drayton.

"Then you wants ter fight this duel, doctor?"

"That is the purpose that brought me to New Mexico."

"And you wants ter, masked man?"

"I intend to, for it has been the wish of my life, for years, so if you wish to keep out of trouble do not interfere."

"I guess I had better keep out, then, and I will. Just fight it out your own way, and I don't want no trouble with the stage company for helping two durned fools to kill themselves."

"You refuse to act for us, then?"

"I does; but I'll see that neither of you play a trick game on t'other."

"Very well. Doctor, as our second shirks the responsibility, I propose that we stand back to back, step off at one, count aloud together five paces, wheel at five, and open fire, pulling trigger until one of us is dead, whether wounded or not. Is that satisfactory?"

"Perfectly. I am easily pleased in this duel with you."

"Then get your weapon ready, please, for I have had mine in condition for years."

Dr. Drayton looked carefully at his revolver, seemed pleased with it, stepped toward the spot where they were to stand, turned, and, grasping Ned Nordeck's hand, said:

"If I fall, this is good-by, my friend, and you will remember about the letter?"

"I will, and I wants ter say right here, while yer is both alive ter hear me, that you two is ther gamest fellows I ever run acrost in all my travels."

CHAPTER VII.

THE DUEL.

Ned Nordeck was sincere in his praise of the two men.

Calm, even smiling, yet bitterly cynical, Dr. Edward Drayton seemed to have not the slightest fear of the consequences.

The Masked Man in Black was stern, yet as cool as though there was no shadow of death hovering over him.

Every arrangement had been effected with the most matter-of-fact indifference and agreed to with a courtly manner that showed Dr. Drayton as willing to enter into the duel of death as was the Masked Man in Black to force it upon him.

The moment all of the preliminaries were made, and Dr. Drayton bade farewell to Ned Nordeck, they stepped to their places.

Then the driver could not refrain from a slight fling at the masked man, whom he could not forgive for hiding his face.

"Say, masked man, you hain't told me good-by, yet."

"I have no last words to offer, no directions to give, no farewells to say. I have not the remotest idea of departing this life for a long time to come, Ned Nordeck."

"You sing mighty loud, pard, but a bullet can choke off life mighty quick, and I thought if you did go under you might say what you wished me to do, or let me know beforehand who you was."

"If I fall, you are free to look at my face. As to my body, feed it to the coyotes, for, with life gone from it, it is but clay.

"Are you ready, Dr. Drayton?"

"Most certainly."

"The doctor had lighted a fresh cigar, and stood at ease, listening to what took place between the masked man and the driver.

With this reply his adversary stepped to the spot where the doctor stood, and each gave the other another long look.

Then they stepped into position, back to back.

The doctor then quietly took his cigar from between his lips, knocked the ashes off, and, handing it to Ned Nordeck, said, in his pleasant way:

"Please hold this for a moment for me, Mr. Nordeck."

"Well, I be durned!" ejaculated Ned, utterly amazed at the coolness of the doctor, and his words brought a light laugh from beneath the black mask, as though the unknown was really amused.

Ned said no more, but stood silently gazing upon the two men, as they stood back to back.

Then the masked man called out:

"Ready!"

"Yes."

"Count!"

"One! two! three! four! five!"

They stepped off quietly at the word one, and, calling the numbers together, kept steady pace.

As the word "Fire" was upon their lips, they wheeled about like automata; each man took in the distance, his adversary's form, and the spot he intended to aim at at a glance.

Their revolvers rose together, their fingers touched trigger, and there was one explosion.

Ned Nordeck uttered an exclamation of surprise, as he saw Dr. Drayton drop his weapon and sink hopelessly to the ground.

Springing toward him, he turned him over, and beheld a round mark in the very center of his forehead.

The bullet had pierced his brain, the aim had been most deadly.

Ned looked up at the masked man, and said, sadly: "He is dead."

"Of course."

"You are a dead shot, mister."

"He was the deadeest of dead shots, too. Look at his revolver."

"It missed fire," said Ned, taking the weapon from the ground.

"His was the fault, then, for he brought the weapons with him, and had confidence in them, he said."

"My God! Mister, ther weapon was not loaded!" cried Ned Nordeck to the Masked Man in Black, and he held the revolver toward him.

The man in black started visibly at the words of the driver, and, stepping forward, grasped the revolver.

Looking at it, he said slowly, and in a low tone, as though speaking more to himself than to Ned Nordeck:

"The weapon is new, and has never been fired.

"Edgar Drayton had tired of life, and came here for me to kill him. It was almost a case of suicide on his part. So let it be, for the result is the same."

Ned was gazing upon the masked face as though trying to penetrate it.

"Well, poor man, his life has been snuffed out. I'll take his body on to the fort for burial," said Ned.

"You will do nothing of the kind."

"Will yer bury it here?"

"That is none of your business, Ned Nordeck. You can take the effects of the dead man, yes, and send the letter as he requested, but I will take charge of the body."

"I don't know about——"

Ned paused, for the revolver of the Masked Man in Black was covering him, the muzzle looking squarely into his eyes.

CHAPTER VIII.

NORDECK'S FRUSTRATED INTENTION.

The driver of the coach to Taos was no coward.

No one would have dared hint as much to him.

But when he saw the lightning-like movement with which the man in black had drawn his revolver and covered him, when he saw the muzzle looking straight into his eyes, held in a hand as firm as rock, he decided that discretion was the better part of valor, and so said:

"You took his life, and now you want the body?"

"That is just it, and as surely as I took his life I shall take his body—that is a part of my creed."

"Well, I never quarrel with a loaded weapon that has got a man at the other end of it.

"Take the body."

"And you take all of his effects.

"Search the body, and see that nothing is left."

"You hain't on ther road-agent racket a little bit?"

"No, I care only for what is my own.

"Now, if you are in a hurry, search the body, take the effects, and by brisk driving you can make up for lost time."

Ned Nordeck took the hint, and a search of the body revealed that the man wore the finest linen, his watch and chain were of the costliest manufacture, his seal ring and sleeve-buttons were massive, and he had a wallet with several hundred dollars and some papers.

Ned put all into the grip, and the Masked Man in Black remarked:

"You are the heir, you know, for I heard him tell you to keep his effects, save the letter."

"I shall turn all over to the colonel; but if I want proof of what has happened here that some of my foes may not say that I killed him, you'll be missing."

"If you get into trouble, I'll see to it that you do not suffer through act of mine."

"Where'll I find you?"

"Nowhere."

"I may be accused."

"I never thought of that before.

"If you are, do you see that tree?"

He pointed to a large live oak.

"I do."

"Send some friend whom you can wholly trust to that tree, and let him tack upon it a slip of paper, saying when he will be there, not sooner than a week after he leaves it there, and I will meet him and give proof that you are wholly innocent of Dr. Edgar Drayton's death."

"By Jove, I believe you, and I'll do it; but give him decent burial, pard."

"I will."

"Want me to help you, for I carries a pick, spade, and shovel along to fix ther trail when it needs it."

"No; I will bury him."

"You want ther pick and spade; then?"

"No, thank you; I am well provided."

"Well, pard, I says good-by to yer, and if you hain't a queer one, set me down for a liar."

"This world is made up of queer people, Nordeck, and there are stranger ones far than I am.

"Good-by."

He held out his hand, and Ned said:

"I'll take t'other one, pard, for that one just kilt him, and we was getting to be good friends."

Without a word the masked man extended his left hand, and, grasping it, Ned said:

"Well, good-by, though I hates to leave you so."

"Do not mind me, Pard Nordeck."

Ned mounted to the box, took up his reins, gave a look at the dead body, another at the masked face of the Man in Black, and called out:

"Git along ag'in, critters!"

The team started up briskly, and the coach rolled on its way once more.

Several times Ned looked back, to see the masked man standing where he had left him.

Going over a ridge that hid him from sight, he then drew rein, put his brake down, tied the lines up tight, and, dismounting from his box, crept back up to the top of the hill.

Hiding in a clump of bushes, he peered back over the trail to see what the Masked Man in Black was doing.

He looked, wiped his eyes, and looked again.

He did not see any one.

The Man in Black had already disappeared.

Ned remembered that with his last backward glance as he went over the ridge, he had seen both the masked man and the body of Dr. Drayton lying at his feet.

The body was now gone.

"Well!

"That was quick work," he muttered.

Returning to the coach, he started again upon his way, driving fast.

About five miles from the spot where the fatal deed had taken place, he came to some timber land, the trees being large and scattering, and the trail good and very level.

Suddenly, ahead, he saw a man come out into the trail and halt, and he half drew rein, but at once held on as before, muttering to himself:

"I'm gittin' skeery, for it's not a Cobra, but Buffalo Bill."

CHAPTER IX.

THE SCOUT INVESTIGATES.

The driver of the Taos coach felt like giving a yell of joy when he saw Buffalo Bill standing far ahead in the trail.

As has been said, he was one of the half score who knew that Buffalo Bill was on the trail of the Cobras for the second time, and he had arranged with the scout to meet him if there was anything of importance to communicate.

The plan had been for Buffalo Bill to appear far ahead on the trail, catch the eye of the driver, and receive a signal if there was any one in the coach by whom he did not wish to be seen.

Then the scout was to go into hiding and Ned Nordeck was to pass him by, having dropped his whip, and, drawing rein, go back after it.

This same plan had been written to Lem Luby.

But now there was no signal to make, and the driver laid his whip upon the horses and drove up at a run to where the scout stood.

The team had evidently been along when road-agents held up the coach, for upon seeing the scout they drew up suddenly without being reined in.

"Well, durn my pictur', ef they don't take you fer a outlaw ter hold us up," cried Ned, as he sprang from the box, for what he had to tell was too important to sit up there and make known.

"Well, Nordeck, all alone, I see."

"Yes, Chief Cody, I am now, but I had comp'ny until half a dozen miles back."

"Where are your passengers now?"

"Only had one, and he's dead."

"Ah! you have been held up?"

"I has and I hasn't, Mr. Cody."

"I don't catch on."

"I was held up, yes, and I were discreet enough not to kick ag'in it."

"The Cobras are at work again, then?"

"This wasn't no Cobra, or, if so, he'd changed his rig, for he was dressed like a gent, and were a Masked Man in Black."

"He must have been a Cobra under false colors, if he was masked."

"He was under false colors if a Cobra, for he didn't rob me, and I've got rich freight along."

Buffalo Bill looked mystified, and Ned then went on to tell the whole story of his strange passenger, the halt by the Masked Man in Black, and the duel.

The scout listened with the deepest interest, and, after asking certain pertinent questions, said:

"And you have the man's effects with you?"

Ned got out the grip and revealed them.

"This is the most remarkable affair I have ever heard of, Nordeck, and I cannot understand it just yet.

"You left the body there, you say?"

"You bet I left it there, sir, for if I hadn't, I'd been left there myself. I saw that, though the man was masked."

"And here I am on foot, miles from my camp, where both my horses are, but I shall go with all haste to the scene of the duel and see what I can discover before sunset," said Buffalo Bill.

"And I'll see you on my run back again, Mr. Cody?"

"Yes, for I would like to know what the colonel thinks of this strange affair."

"I'll tell you, sir."

"I came here to meet you to have you say to Colonel Kane, commander at Fort Taos, that the grave on the river, which he knows about, I am watching closely, and though in the four days I have been on duty I have filled it up, it has been each time dug out, and I am, so far, utterly unable to catch the very clever one who does it."

"I'll tell him, sir."

"And do not speak of the grave to any one else."

"I will not, sir."

"Unless Lieutenant Willis happens to be with the colonel, for he knows about it also."

"I'll remember, sir."

"Do you wish me to bring you anything from the Fort, sir. Yes, here is a little list you can fill out at the sutler's."

"I will meet you either here or at the scene of the duel."

Ned Nordeck remounted his box and drove rapidly on, while Buffalo Bill, throwing his repeating rifle across his shoulder, started on the trail for the scene of the tragedy, his long, swinging stride carrying him rapidly over the ground.

As he neared the ridge where Ned had halted to look back, he made a wide flank movement, gained the timber, and approached the spot hidden by the undergrowth and some rocks.

He crept cautiously forward until he reached the trail and was ready to cover any one with his revolver whom he might find there.

But the place was as silent as the grave—there was no one there.

Buffalo Bill saw at a glance that the masked man had taken the body with him when he left, concealed it, or buried it near.

There were tracks upon the ground of three different feet—of the driver's, his passenger and the Man in Black.

There was the imprint on the grass where the body had been lying, and a small red stain.

That was all the clew that Buffalo Bill had, save the story of Ned Nordeck.

It was growing dark, and again the scout threw his rifle upon his shoulder and strode away, saying, simply:

"To-morrow will tell."

CHAPTER X.

BUFFALO BILL MAKES A DISCOVERY.

Back to his lonely camp went Buffalo Bill, and, finding his horses all right, he changed their feeding ground and turned in for the night as soon as he had eaten his supper.

He was more impressed than he cared to admit by this duel on the trail, and could not account for so strange a circumstance as a man in the prime of life, handsome, as Ned described him, a physician, and certainly not in poverty, had come all the way to New Mexico to allow his life to be taken by some mysterious person, who, dressed in broadcloth in the wilderness, masked his face, and held up a coach to demand his victim, but did not rob either Nordeck or the passenger.

Buffalo Bill had been devoting most of his time to the empty grave on the river while in the secret camp.

Try as he might, he could not catch the one who un-

tiringly kept it cleared of earth and logs, which he as untiringly placed there.

He laid traps, he lay awake all night, watched, planned, plotted, pretended to go away, yet did not, and never saw the unknown sexton who so carefully guarded the grave.

But the very moment he returned to his camp to look after his horses, he found that grave empty.

So it was that he decided to head Ned Nordeck off on the trail and ask him to send Dot Driver or Brazos Ben, two scouts, out to his aid, for he could leave him in camp while he watched, and he had his reasons for not moving his horses away from the encampment where he then was.

But when Buffalo Bill had heard from Ned Nordeck the story of the duel, for some reason he did not make the request for the scout to be sent out to join him.

When it was yet dark Buffalo Bill arose, had his breakfast, mounted his horse Pard and rode away.

He was on the same side of the river where the duel had been fought, and he rode on until he struck the stage trail.

Turning into it, he was not very long in reaching the scene of the duel.

Here he dismounted and spent all of an hour looking about him.

Then he sprang into his saddle and rode for the ford.

The river had a bar just there, made by a bend, where it was not over four feet deep, so the scout could cross by holding his feet upon his saddle.

Once across, the country was open for quite a distance, save the fringe of timber upon the riverbank.

Hitching his horse in the timber, and hidden in a thicket from the view of any one passing along the trail, Buffalo Bill went on foot to the grave, half a mile up the river.

In going there before, cold as the water was, he was in the habit of packing his clothes and weapons, wrapped in his rubber blankets, upon two logs tied together, and swimming across, pushing his little raft ahead of him.

This gave him an unseen, unlooked for and noiseless approach to the bank, where he landed not twenty feet from the grave.

But for all this he had not been able to catch what he called the "Specter Sexton."

Now he walked boldly up the riverbank, and he could well see the way ahead through the scattering timber.

The moment his eyes fell upon the grave he came to a standstill.

His eyes were riveted upon it.

Instead of the open grave, he saw that it had been filled.

He had done this the last time he was there, filling it completely, to make the "Sexton" take longer in digging it out.

But that was not all that riveted the eye of the scout, the fact that the grave was filled up.

Hastily he walked to the grave, and stood beside it.

All about was as neatly done as though in reality it had been the work of a sexton.

The mound was not as he had left it, but perfect.

And more, there was a headboard.

It was a post of solid cedar, cut square, a foot in diameter, and rising above the grave some three feet.

Into this headboard was carved with great skill the following:

WITHIN THIS GRAVE
LIES ALL THAT IS MORTAL
OF

EDGAR DRAYTON, M. D.,
KILLED IN A DUEL NEAR THIS SPOT ON
APRIL 2D, 18—. .
BY THE HAND OF AN AVENGER.

"The mills of the Gods grind slowly,
But the grist is exceeding fine."

Buffalo Bill noted one strange circumstance, that the post had been cut for a long while, for it was time-stained, as was also all of the lettering, except the date,

APRIL 2D, 18—.

And that was freshly carved, the shavings cut out lying near as proof of this.

"Well, this is a discovery, indeed.

"This grave has at last found the occupant it was dug for. The avenger is avenged.

"I wonder if he has his eye on me now, for he has watched here much closer than I have?"

CHAPTER XI.

THE COLONEL'S MESSENGER.

As Ned Nordeck's coach neared the scene of the duel, on its run back over the trail, there were two persons seen on the box, the driver and an officer in fatigue uniform.

The latter was Lieutenant Willis, the same officer who with Buffalo Bill had peered over the cliff at night into the canyon where the outlaws had their secret camp.

"He is there, lieutenant," said Ned Nordeck, as the coach approached the spot where Dr. Drayton had fallen at the hands of the Masked Man in Black.

As the driver spoke they saw Buffalo Bill step out into the trail, and, receiving the signal that all was right, he remained there awaiting their approach.

In a short while the coach drew up, and Lieutenant Willis sprang to the ground, and, grasping the scout's hand, said, cordially:

"I'm glad to see you, Cody, and your self-imposed exile does not seem to disagree with you, for you are looking well."

"And am well, sir, and glad to see you, though the pleasure is unexpected."

"Nordeck has told you, of course, of the affair that occurred here?"

"Yes, and I come as Colonel Kane's especial messenger to make as thorough an investigation as is possible, with what news I have of the affair from Nordeck."

"I can give you more information, lieutenant."

"I expected that, Cody, for you are never idle upon a trail. As Nordeck turned the effects of this Dr. Drayton, and the letter to be sent also, over to the colonel, he wrote at once to the address, giving full particulars, as we had them, and the letters go by this coach east."

"Now what have you found out?"

"The empty grave has an occupant."

"At last!"

"Did you put him there?"

"Dr. Drayton is the one who rests in the grave, sir."

"Can it be possible?"

"There is my horse, sir, and I will mount and cross the river with you, so that you can go up to the grave."

"I will do so."

The lieutenant returned to his seat upon the box, and was soon after on the other side of the river, Buffalo Bill following on horseback.

Arriving at the grave, the lieutenant stood for some time reading the inscription upon the cedar post, and looking about him.

"Well, Cody, this is remarkable."

"It is a strange case, Lieutenant Willis."

"Do you feel sure that the body of Dr. Drayton is in the grave?"

"I am certain,

"Still, I think that the grave should be opened."

"I have already opened it, sir."

"Ah!"

"And the body of Dr. Drayton is there?"

"Of course, I never saw him, but the body is that of a man such as Nordeck described. There is a bullet wound in the very center of the forehead, he is dressed in dark clothes, and I feel that there is not the slightest doubt but that the one in the grave is the passenger who came out on the coach and fought the duel with the masked man."

"And who is he?"

"That is to be found out, sir. What the masked man does, he does well, sir, for the body was placed in it, with his clothing neatly arranged."

"I replaced all as I found it, and filled in the grave as before, so you see there is no doubt, sir, of the body being that of Dr. Drayton, the inscription on this cedar headboard also stating that fact."

"Yes, it must be so; but I was dubious on account of this grave having been kept open so long."

"My idea is, sir, that it has been dug for a long time, say for half a year or more, and was dug for the body now resting in it."

"It must be so, but now about this Masked Man in Black, as Nordeck calls him."

"He has thus far, Lieutenant Willis, been too clever and cunning for me."

"You will see that all the lettering in that cedar headboard has been cut for some time, save the date, and here are the shavings that came from its having been carved out here at the grave."

"Now, that post is well made, and so is the coffin, and it took the best of tools to work with."

"The man that did it must have a habitation somewhere near here, and there did the work."

"As he never comes here on horseback, he leaves no trail, and save a track in the soft earth, I have nothing to trace him by."

"He has done his work, filled his mission, in killing Dr. Drayton, so he may leave here at once, and forever."

"But that I will find out in time, for I have set my traps to betray the coming of any one here, and I shall not give up the search."

"Now, sir, is there any news at the Fort?"

"None; but we all fear you are imposing an exile upon yourself."

"You go on to Herders' Ranch, I suppose?"

"Yes, to see if I can learn anything there."

"Try and see if you can hear anything of the outlaws, sir."

"I will," and, returning to the coach, the officer was soon on his way again.

CHAPTER XII.

PANTHER PETE.

When the coach, after Buffalo Bill had gotten the supplies asked for, and said he would meet the lieutenant on his return trip, rolled on once more, Ned Nordeck driving briskly to make up for lost time, the driver heard from the officer what had become of the body of Dr. Drayton.

"Well, I declare, if that Masked Man in Black ain't a daisy!"

"He killed his man, and buries him in style, coffin, headboard, and all."

"Lieutenant, yer should know that man, fer yer'd like him."

"I would like to know him, for he must be a very remarkable personage."

"He is all that, sir."

"You have never seen any one about the country here whom you could connect with the appearance of the masked man?"

"Not a soul, sir."

"Nor at Herders' Ranch?"

"No, sir; for except Taylor Travis and a few of the rich ranchers, there hain't anybody at the Ranch to fill the bill o' that man."

"Why, lieutenant, he is a gent, an' no mistake, and there is nothing of the tough or desperado about him."

"He had a debt ter pay, for some reason, an' t'other gent come ter settle up, and I guesses, as he didn't load his weapon, he know'd well who was ter blame."

"It is a total mystery, Nordeck. But do you know any one who has a ranch or cabin on the trail, or near it, between Herders' Ranch and Taos?"

"I only knows of one, and he lives miles to the westward of here."

"Who is he?"

"They calls him Panther Pete, sir, and he is a pelt hunter."

"Yes, I have heard of him, but never seen him. He has been suspected of being an ally of the Comanches, as they never seemed to trouble him, and of El Cobras, as they also let him alone, and both redskins and out-

laws must have often been by his camp. But nothing could be proved against him, and so he was never molested, and continues to trap, and sell his pelts."

"Yes, sir; I gets his supplies now and then for him, as he don't care to go to Herders' Ranch. He meets me generally about a mile ahead of where we now are, gives me some money and a list of what he needs, and I bring them out on my run back.

"Every time he pays for the carrying, and will have it that I shall accept a present for my trouble, too, so there is nothing mean about him."

"What kind of a looking man is he?"

"He's fairly tall, well built as strength goes, but has a kind of hump on his back.

"He dresses in buckskin, and wears his shaggy hair long, and beard, too, not being handsome, as the word goes; at least, I wouldn't think so if I were a gal."

"How far is his cabin from the grave on the river?"

"I've never been to his cabin, sir, but I should say, from what he has told me, it must be a dozen miles, maybe more."

"Then he couldn't be your Man in Black?"

Ned laughed, and replied:

"No, indeed, sir; Panther Pete could never be a gent, and that the masked man was.

"Then, too, there is Panther Pete's hump, and his way of carrying himself was not like that gent's."

"Then we must look elsewhere for our Man in Black; but there is some one in the trail ahead.

"Is it another case of hold up?" and Lieutenant Willis got his weapons ready for use.

"It's Panther Pete, sir. Speak of ther devil, and his imps will appear," cried Ned.

Lieutenant Willis gazed with considerable interest upon the man they were approaching.

He stood in the trail, leaning upon his rifle.

His form would have been tall, but for the stoop in his broad shoulders and the slight hump upon his back.

He was dressed in buckskin, and had on his head a foxskin cap, all of his own tanning.

His hair was long, iron-gray, and his beard was tucked into his buckskin hunting shirt.

At a glance the man's face was not prepossessing, yet there was strength in it, and he looked you straight in the eye while speaking.

"Pard, I want a few things this run, so here is ther list and ther money.

"I'll be here on yer way back ter meet yer," he said, quietly.

"Say, my man, do you know of any dwellers in these wilds, save yourself?" asked Lieutenant Willis.

"Injuns."

"I know; but any white men?"

"Ther outlaws prowls through here all ther time, but they is of dif'rent breeds."

"Have you seen any El Cobras lately?"

"Not fer a couple o' weeks."

"Guess they has had a skeer from that Northern scout bein' here."

"Who?"

"Buffalo Bill, they calls him."

"He was after them, was he?"

"He came from Taos, and you is from there."

"Why is the Comanches never trouble you, my man?"

"Because their head chief protects me."

"Why should he do that?"

"For the same reason the outlaws lets me alone—they has orders to do so."

"But are you the ally of the Comanches?"

"I keeps peace with them, but I has warned the settlement if they attempts a raid, when I knows it."

"Why are you not their foe?"

"I is their foe, officer, only they ain't mine."

"Why not?"

"I'll tell yer. Ther head chief tackled a panther one time, ther mate of it come, and but for me happening along, they'd hev' chawed ther life out of him.

"He were badly used up, and I toted him to my cabin and doctored him for a month, for I didn't see fit ter tarn him over to ther fort, when he fell into my hands as he did."

"You were perfectly right; but now tell me if you know of any man in these parts living alone, as you do?"

"Nary one."

"You have seen no strangers about the country of late?"

"Only thet scout, Buffalo Bill."

"Would you be likely to see one if he came to this part of the country?"

"Might, and mightn't."

"I goes about my business, looking for no one, but ef I seed a stranger trail I'd see whar' it went.

"Good-morning, officer," and Panther Pete shouldered his rifle and strode away.

"A strange character that, but an honest man, I feel certain, or signs fail," muttered Lieutenant Willis, as the stage continued on its way.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE YOUNG RANCHERO.

There was quite a crowd gathered at Herders' Ranch to see the coach come in, and Broadaxe Jack Tobin, the "great man" of the settlement, received the lieutenant with courteous hospitality.

He had the looks and manners of a gentleman, in spite of his record as a man-killer, and he was so suave and quiet in his words and actions that no one would have suspected him of being such a terror if driven to it.

"No news of any more disturbances of the Cobras?" said the lieutenant.

"None, sir."

This was said within the hearing of a score of men about the cabin, for Jack Tobin was one who was in the secret of Buffalo Bill's being after the outlaws.

Just then a horseman rode up, and, dismounting, approached Lieutenant Willis.

He rode a black horse that was a splendid animal, and his bridle and saddle were worth a small fortune.

The rider was dressed in a pair of corduroy pants, stuck in handsome boots, a velvet jacket, slouch hat, and wore a white negligee shirt.

He was a handsome young fellow, and had a face daring and determined.

He was Taylor Travis, a young ranchero, who lived some fifteen miles away from Herders' Ranch.

He was said to be very rich, had the largest herds of cattle and of horses, and the best cabin in that part of the country, and, what was more, had it well furnished.

Taylor Travis was a popular man in Herders' Ranch, for he was ever generous, cordial in manner, and held himself aloof from no one.

He was not a dissipated man, but he drank in moderation, Jack Tobin ordering the very best of liquors and cigars for his use, and when he treated, which was a steady habit of his, he meant all should have the best.

His visits to Herders' Ranch were frequent, and whenever he came he gambled, playing for any sum his adversary cared to risk, for he was an inveterate gambler, and more frequently won than lost.

Such was the man who now came forward and greeted Lieutenant Willis, the two shaking hands cordially.

"Anything important, Lieutenant Willis, that brings you to the Ranch?" he asked, in a way that showed interest rather than curiosity.

"Let me tell you what brings me to the Ranch," and he told both Tobin and Taylor Travis the story of the remarkable duel on the trail.

It could be seen that both men were impressed, and they talked long and earnestly over it.

"The colonel wishes the matter kept quiet until news comes in reply to the letter he has written East, and it is best that the story of the duel does not get out; but he is anxious in some way to find the man that killed Dr. Drayton, so I must ask you both to see if you can place anybody here, or among the ranchers, who would answer to the description Nordeck gives of this man in black."

Neither Taylor or Travis nor Jack Tobin could think of any one whom the description would fit, but promised to try and see if they could find out such a person.

"I will be here until day after to-morrow, when the coach goes back to Taos, Mr. Travis, so if you hear of anything of interest in the matter, please let me know, and also of anything regarding El Cobras."

"I will, sir, with pleasure."

The more that Lieutenant Willis talked with the men about Herders' Ranch—those whose opinions were worthy of consideration—the more he was convinced that it was a wise move on the part of Buffalo Bill to go into hiding, so certain did all seem to feel that El Cobras would not be very long in showing themselves again.

Jack Tobin was a pleasant companion, but he had his duties to attend to, and as Taylor Travis, the young ranchero, had returned to his ranch during the night, and Lieutenant Willis found time hanging heavy upon his hands, he determined to get Broadaxe's best horse and accept the invitation he had received to ride out and see the handsome young cattle king.

His way led through miles of prairie land for nearly half a score of miles, and then he had a hilly and timbered country to cross, the ranches lying beyond this.

He had ridden briskly as far as the hills, and was going at a slow pace to give his horse a breathing spell, when he heard the rapid clatter of approaching hoofs.

He wondered who it could be that was riding at such a pace, when he heard, in the distance, a man's voice, shouting:

"Use your rifle, and bring her horse down!"

"If you harm her I will kill you."

These words put Lieutenant Willis at once upon his guard, and upon his mettle as well.

He had brought his repeating rifle along for any game he might run across, and he quickly unslung it, reined his horse back behind a bowlder, and just then a horse bearing a rider dashed into view.

The horse was urged to full speed by the whip of the rider, and was coming straight toward the lieutenant.

The rider, a glance revealed, was a young girl.

The officer was upon a ridge, over which his trail ran turning abruptly at the bottom of the hill to the right and to the left, up and down a small valley.

The fugitive was coming down the valley, and was turning up a hill, when a shot came from the direction in which the voice had been heard.

The horse gave a bound, staggered, strained on up the hill, and, as he was falling, the rider caught up her skirt, leaped free of her saddle, and alighted safely upon her feet, turning at bay with a revolver in her hand.

She was within fifty feet of the officer, and presented a beautiful and thrilling picture as she stood, a young girl at bay.

She was clad in a close-fitting riding-habit of dark blue, wore a black slouch hat and plume, gantlet gloves, and McKenny Willis, as he beheld her, mentally vowed that he had never seen woman half so beautiful before.

Her hair was of gold bronze hue, and hung in two braids down to her knees.

Her face, still flushed by her rapid ride, was beautiful, and her attitude was that of one who knew how to use the revolver in her hand, and dared do it, too.

Not a moment did Lieutenant Willis allow her to remain in ignorance of help at hand, for he called out: "Keep your stand, miss, for aid is near."

She uttered a startled cry, turned quickly, saw the blue uniform and said, in a low but earnest tone:

"Oh, thank you. But there are four of them!"

McKenny Willis did not care, just then, if there were a dozen, and he answered back:

"All right, miss."

Just then a horseman dashed into sight around the clump of timber on the hillside and yelled out:

"I killed her horse, and here she is."

A whoop came from up the valley, while Lieutenant Willis muttered:

"Yes, and here I am."

In another moment the man dashed up and threw himself from his horse, halting some twenty feet away from the girl, who still maintained her defiant attitude.

The man was a rough-looking fellow, bearded, long-haired, and armed.

"I say, gal, put up that weepin, or I'll lariat yer," and the man turned to take his lariat from his saddle-horn.

"Lay your hand upon that lasso, and I'll send a bullet through your heart!" came the quick rejoinder of the girl.

"Oh, I knows yer kin shoot fer dead center, so I'll wait for t'others."

As the man spoke, two other horsemen dashed into sight, and came up the hill, one shouting:

"Yer has sure got her, Hook."

"I hain't so sart'in, pard, fer she's a shooter, and look tha'!" and the man called Hook pointed to the defiant attitude of the young girl.

"Lordy! she do show fight," and the two men had now dismounted and joined their comrade, the three standing twenty feet away from their prey, and with an undecided look upon their faces.

Then Hook whispered to one of the men, who held a lasso in his hand, and, springing behind his horse for protection, he threw the coil with force and skill.

But as the noose left his hand there came a shot, and though the coil settled over the head of the girl at bay, the one that threw it fell dead ere it reached her.

CHAPTER XIV.

DYING WITH SEALED LIPS.

The shot and its fatal result startled the two men, who at first thought the girl had fired upon them.

But quickly following the shot there came bounding out from behind the bowlder Lieutenant Willis, revolver in hand.

He seemed not satisfied with dropping one of the men, and wishing to put the other two to flight, for he shouted in the sharp tones his men knew so well:

"Hands up, both of you!"

But the response was two shots, followed by a third and a fourth, all fired almost together.

Down went the officer's horse, but even as he fell Willis fired and another of the outlaws fell, while the third, bounding upon the back of his pony, was off like an arrow, unhurt by the rapid shots sent after him by the young girl, for Lieutenant Willis had fallen heavily.

But he was quickly on his feet, and grasped the second outlaw as he was striving to escape.

The moment the man turned, Lieutenant Willis saw that he was wounded, his shot having entered his breast.

"Come, my man, resistance is useless," he said, sternly.

"I guesses I knows it, and I won't hang."

"That will be decided later."

"I says no, fer don't you see I has got it where I live, that yer shots has done fer me," and the man dropped down and leaned his back against the dead horse of the young girl.

"Yes, you are hard hit, I believe."

"Let me see if I can help you," said the officer, kindly.

"Doctor me up ter hang, yer means; but it hain't no use. I'm almost dead."

"I am sorry for you, but you sought to harm this lady, and you must take the consequences."

The girl had stood apart until then, uttering no word.

But now she advanced and said:

"It was not your work, for you had a master, and did what you did for gold."

"Who is that master?"

The man looked at her, but made no reply.

"I feel very, very sorry for you, my poor fellow, for I do not believe you intended me harm, other than in capturing me at the command of another."

"Who was he?"

"I cannot tell, miss."

"You mean that you will not."

"I will not tell, miss."

"You did not act for yourself, then?"

"No, miss."

"And that man lying there, and the one who escaped?"

"Were the same as me, miss."

"Your leader was with you not ten minutes ago, for I heard his voice."

The man was silent.

"Speak, my man, and as you feel you must die, confess to this lady the crime you entered into against her," said Lieutenant Willis.

"I'm going to die, but I won't tell."

"Would you die with such a sin on your conscience?"

"If I confessed, I would break my oath, die with a greater sin upon my conscience—no, I will not tell."

The man had dropped his dialect, and he seemed to suffer more and more, while his face had already taken on the hue of death.

He was a young man, but sin and dissipation had branded his face irrevocably.

At last he said, faintly:

"This is a sad scene for you, miss; go, and leave me to die alone, and have this officer escort you, for other dangers may threaten."

"I will not go. I would not be a true woman to leave you now, even though you did seek to harm me."

"You were good once, you had a mother, sisters, perhaps, and as none are near to say one word to you in your dying moments, I will not desert you."

"Come, let us see if we cannot make him more comfortable, sir," and she turned to Lieutenant Willis, looking up into his face as she dropped upon her knees by the side of the dying man.

"God bless you," murmured the man, and mentally Lieutenant Willis repeated:

"God bless her."

"No, let me rest as I am, sir," said the dying man, as Lieutenant Willis would have moved him, and he half raised his hand as though he would, had he dared have touched that of the girl.

She saw his act, and at once grasped his hand, saying, softly:

"I feel, too, that you must die, that perhaps it is a question of a few minutes—can I do anything for you, have you any last request to leave?"

The man said nothing.

"Yes, my poor fellow, you may have a word to send to some one, a wish, and I will be most glad to write to any one for you, or do anything in my power."

"And these kind words from the lips of the one I would have wronged, from the man whose shot sends me to my grave."

Lieutenant Willis winced at the words, but answered:

"With this lady I feel no unkindness toward you now."

"What I did, I deemed my duty."

"It was your duty, and I am justly punished."

"You were plucky to attack three of us—the fourth ran off—he would not be seen."

"Who was it?"

"I will not tell, sir, for he served me well, once; but I thank you, miss, I thank you, sir, but I have no confession to make, no message to send to any one."

"I am a black sheep, and will cause no more pain to those whom I leave—let me die, and my fate remain unknown; yes put 'Unknown' upon my grave—that is all."

CHAPTER XV.

THE "UNKNOWN" AT REST.

Quietly, with the young girl clasping his hand, the young reprobate sank into the sleep of death, once, before the breath faded away, opening his eyes and fastening them upon the beautiful face bending over him, and, while a smile came hovering about his lips, he muttered:

"It was just like you, mother, to forgive me—I am happy now."

His mind had wandered back into the past, and his blinding eyes had seen in the face of the girl that of his mother.

McKenny Willis had risen, and stood with arms folded, gazing not upon the dying man, but away off over the prairie through a vista in the trees.

It was a bitter moment for him, though he could not reproach himself for having done his duty.

Had the man died differently, he would have accepted it as a soldier's lot to send him out of life.

But to pass away as he did, dying from the wound his hand had dealt, with the girl whom he had sought to kidnap bending over him in forgiveness, and clasping his hand in sympathy, uttering no word against the man who had wrecked him, the one who had sent him to his death through doing an evil deed, refusing his name to allow those who loved him to know how he died, and wishing only the word "Unknown" put upon the headboard that marked his grave; all in all, it was a scene that made a deep impression upon the young officer, one he could never forget.

It was a sad picture he gazed upon when he looked again, and, kneeling, he laid his finger upon the pulse, and said:

"He is dead."

Then he took the form and drew it into the thicket, folded the hands across the breast, and, taking a blanket from the fallen pony of the dead youth, spread it over the two bodies, lying side by side.

To catch the other two ponies was the work of a few minutes, and to transfer his own and the young

girl's saddles and bridles to their backs was his next move.

The girl had stood silently watching him, and when he approached her leading the two horses she stepped forward with extended hand, and said:

"Now let me thank you, sir, for all that you did for me, though words seem cold, indeed, to show gratitude to one who risked his life for me, who took upon his conscience the lives of two men.

"I feel more than I can tell you how deeply grateful I am."

The tears stood in her beautiful eyes, and her voice, low and musical, quivered with emotion.

"Pray do not thank a man for doing what only a dastard would refuse to do, and you know killing is a soldier's trade."

He spoke in a light vein, but she noted a tinge of bitterness in his tone, and replied:

"Wanton killing is murder, sir, but to take life in a good cause has won honor and rank from the beginning of time; but let us at least know each other by name—I am Rose Reeves, of Evergreen Ranch, some six miles from here," and she again extended her hand.

"And I am McKenny Willis, First Lieutenant Commanding Troop A, —th Cavalry, stationed at Fort Taos."

"Ah, indeed! Your gallant conduct in my defense simply verifies all that I have heard of you, for I know you, sir, as the commander of the two battles with the Comanches of late, and thus the one who prevented our settlement and ranches to be visited by death and destruction—yes, Mr. Travis has told me much of you, and my father was one of the ranchers who served under you in the fight near Herders' Ranch."

"Yes, I recall your father, Miss Reeves, and I know Mr. Travis, but they have said more of me than I deserved, for I was but an humble instrument as commander, while the hero of both battles, the one whose advice I followed, was the great scout, William F. Cody, better known as Buffalo Bill."

"Yes, I have heard much of him, since I was a little girl, but his pluck and cleverness do not take all credit from you."

"Will you go to Evergreen Ranch with me, Lieutenant Willis, and meet my parents, accepting our hospitality?"

"Thank you, I will escort you home with pleasure, and ask your father to send after and bury these bodies, but I was on my way to visit Mr. Taylor Travis."

"He lives miles to the north of us. His ranch being the one nearest the Indian danger line. You should have taken the third trail to the left this way from Herders' Ranch, to go there, though you can return that way from Evergreen."

He bowed and aided her to mount, and in another moment they were going rapidly along on their way to Evergreen Ranch.

The young girl set the pace, and in less than an hour

they passed into the gate that led to a park-like enclosure, in which stood a large and massive-built cabin of logs, surrounded by a broad piazza, and with a flat roof with breastworks above for defense.

Upon a piazza sat a gentleman of fifty and a lady, both of them appearing little like the general ranchers about them.

The gentleman Lieutenant Willis remembered to have seen at the Indian battle near Herders' Ranch, he having come to the fight at the head of a score of cowboys, and had been introduced by Taylor Travis, who commanded another band of cattlemen.

"Why, Lieutenant Willis, this is indeed a pleasure most unexpected, and I am most happy to welcome you to Evergreen Ranch—my wife, Lieutenant Willis, and let me say we all know you here, and bless you for what you did for us."

Such was McKenny Willis' welcome at Evergreen Ranch, and when the ranchero and his wife had heard the cause of his escorting Rose home, then indeed they were most earnest in their greeting.

"You will stay to dinner, at least, and I'll send men at once to the scene for those bodies," said Ranchero Reeves, and this the officer consented to do, and he greatly enjoyed the feast of good things placed before him.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE ROSE OF EVERGREEN RANCH.

McKenny Willis had heard of the Rose of Evergreen, and that the Reeves' were people above their neighbors in social position and wealth, though they never looked down upon the humblest cowboy upon their ranch.

Ranchero Reeves had been one of the first settlers in that part of the country, and had had many ups and downs with being burnt out by the Comanches and robbed by outlaws, but he had prospered in spite of all setbacks, and was the richest man in these parts, save Taylor Travis.

Rose had been reared from early girlhood in the saddle, could shoot revolver and rifle unerringly, also a bow and arrow, and could lasso a mustang at full speed.

Her mother had taught her at home, as also had her father, who was a scholar, in all her studies, until her sixteenth year, when she had been sent to a fashionable boarding school in New Orleans for one year, and New York for another, to complete her education.

She had returned to the ranch six months before, a finished young lady, accomplished in music and painting, and more beautiful than ever, but had at once dashed heart and soul into the old-time wild life of the prairies again.

The cowboys had named her the Rose of Evergreen, and a dozen young cattlemen at once became her de-

voted slaves, until it was said by all, Taylor Travis was the favored one, though Rose Reeves had never seemed to show partiality to any one.

Thus matters stood when she had been rescued by McKenny Willis when out for her morning gallop, which often extended a dozen miles.

Mr. Reeves had regarded the attempted kidnaping of his daughter as the work of some of the El Cobra band, attempting to capture and hold her for a large ransom.

She told how she had been riding slowly along, when two lassos were thrown to ensnare her.

Fortunately she had eluded both, and started in flight, when, looking back, she saw four men following in hot pursuit, one of them dressed in deep black, with face wholly masked.

That was the man whom Lieutenant Willis had heard give the order to shoot her horse, and he had done so.

And that same Man in Black had not appeared on the scene with the three whom Rose had faced when she stood at bay.

Who he was was a mystery to Mr. Reeves, and if Rose had any suspicion she held her peace.

As for Lieutenant Willis, he said nothing, but he could not but recall the Masked Man in Black, the duellist who had killed Dr. Drayton.

The bodies were brought in from the ridge, and while one of them was to be buried with others killed in battling off raiders from the ranch, the youth who had died unknown, and refusing to confess who the real kidnaper was, was to find a resting-place down by brook beneath a spreading oak tree, a picturesque and the romantic spot, where Rose often loved to go and read.

She would have it so, and her father yielded to her, so the body was borne there by six cowboys, who recognized him as a young man who worked on a ranch a number of miles away, along with the man who had been killed with him.

The cowboys could not understand the partiality shown, but both Rose and Lieutenant Willis did, and Mr. and Mrs. Reeves understood it when they heard how he had died, and in a low, plaintive voice the young girl read the service of the dead over the remains of the Unknown.

It was late in the afternoon when Lieutenant Willis mounted the horse of the young kidnaper, and a fine animal it was, and departed on the trail leading to Oak Park Ranch, the home of Taylor Travis.

He had declined the hospitable urging of Mr. Reeves, his wife and daughter, to remain, saying that he would visit Mr. Travis as he had intended to do, and must be back that night in Herders' Ranch, to catch the coach for Taos early the next morning.

It was a ten-mile ride to Oak Park Ranch, but Lieutenant Willis kept his horse in a steady canter all the

way, and came in sight of the young ranchero's home just as the sun was nearing the horizon.

If he had admired the ranch of Mr. Reeves, that of the young ranchero was one to command greater admiration, and the officer was surprised to find it well furnished, a piano there, as at Evergreen, and every indication of solid comfort.

The ranchero met him as he dismounted, gave him a most cordial greeting, and when he had heard the story of his rescue of the Rose of Evergreen, he said, with frankness and earnestness:

"Lieutenant Willis, what would I not give to have done what you have—saved that noble girl from harm?"

"But you mystify me about this Masked Man in Black, and I shall do all in my power to find him out for you."

After supper, and a couple of hours spent at the ranch, Lieutenant Willis mounted his horse and started for the settlement, Taylor Travis saying that he would accompany him a few miles to put him upon the right trail.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE MEETING IN THE DARK.

Lieutenant Willis parted with Taylor Travis some five miles from the latter's ranch, and there was no doubt in the officer's mind but that the ranchero was desperately in love with the Rose of Evergreen.

"He gave me fair notice that he was deeply interested in her, and hinted that she had given him strong reason to hope that his regard for her was reciprocated, and that dashes my prospects to the ground, for if ever a man fell in love at first sight, I have done so, and it would not be becoming in an officer and a gentleman to press his suit when forewarned that another stands in the way."

He halted his reverie quickly, for he saw a horseman coming toward him.

Of course, he was likely to meet some one, and it was to be expected, riding as he was, along a settlement trail.

But he knew that Travis' ranch was out of the beaten way, and that any one traveling that trail must be going there.

It was ten o'clock at night, clear starlight, and bright enough to see the well-marked trail before him, and that a horseman had come over a rise a hundred yards distant, and was advancing toward him.

He was yet ten miles from Herders' Ranch, and the nearest habitation to him that he was aware of was Taylor Travis' ranch.

He did not draw rein at sight of the horseman, nor did the latter appear to do so when seeing him.

But McKenny Willis prepared to meet friend or foe. He got his revolver out, and held it in one hand ready for quick use.

Nearer and nearer the man approached, and as the horse came along at a walk, the form of the rider wavered from side to side.

"He is either asleep or drunk," muttered the officer, and just then the stranger's horse halted just before him.

"Ho, pard, which way?" called out the officer.

There was no reply.

"Come, my man, wake up, for it is dangerous to sleep on a trail these times."

Still no reply.

"Hello! hello! Whoop!" shouted Lieutenant Willis.

It made no impression upon the rider, and the horse stood with lowered head, as though also asleep, or very tired.

Finding that the man made no reply, Lieutenant Willis rode forward, and, laying his hand upon his shoulder, said, sternly:

"Come, my man; wake up!"

The form swayed toward him as he grasped it, and then, for the first time, a thought flashed through the brain of the officer as he beheld something he had not seen before.

Placing his hand upon the face of the horseman, Lieutenant Willis cried:

"My God! he is dead, and bound in his saddle!"

It was a shock to the soldier, strong as his nerves were, that he had been trying to awaken the dead.

He leaned forward and placed his hand over the man's face.

It was still.

The pulse gave back no throb to his touch.

He saw that the man was not only bound in his saddle, but arranged there with great care to make him comfortable.

Two sticks had been cut and one end placed in the ground on each side of the saddle, and bound around the body with a lasso to hold him form erect, while the reins had been tied to the horn, the feet to the girth. Holding up the head, the lieutenant looked into it by the starlight.

But this did not satisfy him, so he took from his pocket a silver match-case.

Striking a match he took from it, he held the flame close to the man's face and regarded the countenance by the light.

"I do not think I can be mistaken, though I got but a hasty glance of him this morning. Yes, I am pretty certain that it is the man who escaped, one of the trio who attacked Miss Reeves."

His retribution has been swift, but who was his enemy?

Who was it that tied him thus in his saddle, and left his horse loose?"

Unable to answer this question, Lieutenant Willis hesitated a minute as to what he should do.

Should he turn the horse loose again and allow him to go on his way to some ranch, to be found and cared

for by others, perhaps going to the ranch of Taylor Travis, as he was on the direct trail, or should he lead the animal and his ghastly rider to Herders' Ranch with him.

After deliberation, he decided upon the latter course.

So he took the reins and started once more upon his way, going at a slower pace than before, as he had the horse in lead.

He had gone several miles when he came to a ridge of timber, the same which he had crossed in the morning at a point miles further down, and at the very moment when he could be of such valuable service to the Rose of Evergreen.

He was just entering the timber, when loud came the words:

"Lieutenant Willis, by the gods of war!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

BUFFALO BILL'S STORY.

"Buffalo Bill's voice among a thousand!"

This was the answer of Lieutenant Willis, given after hearing his name called from the darkness of the timber he was entering.

"You are right, lieutenant, and glad am I to meet you."

With these words the tall form of Buffalo Bill stepped out of the thicket into the starlight.

"And how is it I find you here, Bill?" asked the officer, after grasping the scout's hand.

"I was just going to ask you that question, sir, especially as you have my dead man with you."

"Your dead man?"

"Yes, sir, I may so call him."

"You killed him, then?"

"No, sir, I did not, but I claimed him, as I found him."

"Found him?"

"I'll tell you how it was, sir, as soon as I have gotten my horse, which is a hundred yards away, for I will ride along with you a mile to a trail by which I go back to my stamping ground."

"I am interested, Cody, so get your horse and come along, for what you are doing here I cannot imagine."

Buffalo Bill walked back into the timber, but soon returned, mounted upon Pard.

Wheeling alongside of the lieutenant, Buffalo Bill said:

"No, sir, I did not kill the man, but he told me who did."

"I think I know him, Bill."

"Indeed, sir."

"From his own account, he was not a creditable acquaintance."

"No; but you talked with him, then?"

"He did the talking—the little that he could do."

"I was coming along a trail when I discovered him."

"His horse was in a walk, and he was reeling in the saddle, holding hard to the horn.

"I supposed he had been imbibing tanglefoot in Herders' Ranch.

"Suddenly, when some distance from me, he fell from the saddle and his horse began to crop grass near."

"It was daylight, then?"

"Yes, sir; half an hour before sunset."

"Well?"

"I rode up to him, and then saw that he was wounded.

"He was moaning pitifully, and had no fewer than three wounds in his back, one a scalp wound, that was slight, another bullet having entered under his right shoulder, and a third was in his neck.

"He had bled a great deal, but had bound the wounds up as best he could.

"I saw by his face that he was a tough citizen, but, of course, wished to do all that I could for him, and did.

"A stream ran near, and I bathed his wounds, but I knew that the one under the shoulder blade was fatal, that it was but a question of a short time.

"The one in the neck, too, had cut through his mouth, and was a bad one.

"I told him frankly that time was up with him, and asked if I could do anything for him.

"He groaned bitterly at this, and asked who I was.

"I told him, and he seemed startled, for he said:

"If I get over this you will hang me?"

"Then I told him I was not in the hanging business, and again asked what I could do for him, when he said, eagerly:

"You are sure I will die?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"Within an hour or two."

"When I do, tie me on my horse, turn his head in yonder direction, and start him home."

"Where do you live?"

"Never mind."

"What is your name?"

"It does not matter."

"Who wounded you?"

"He was silent, and I repeated:

"Who gave you your wounds?"

"A girl."

"Ah, I feared it," muttered Lieutenant Willis, and Buffalo Bill seemed surprised at his words, but continued:

"His answer, as I said, was that a girl had given him the wounds.

"A girl," I asked.

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I attempted to kidnap her."

"When?"

"This morning."

"Why did you do so?"

"I had orders."

"From whom?"

The lieutenant drew a long breath.

Was he now going to learn the truth which the young kidnaper had died refusing to confess?

Was he going to learn the name of the leader of the kidnapers, and which he half believed that Rose Reeves knew?

"Go on, Bill, I am much interested," he said, calmly.

"When I asked him who had given him orders to kidnap a young girl, he did not reply for a while, and then said:

"I won't tell, for I took my chances with the others, and they were wiped out.

"If I had been successful, my pay would have been big, and I won't betray him now."

"There were others with you, then?"

"Yes; our leader and two pardons of mine.

"The captain escaped, my pardons were killed, and I am going on the same trail, but I won't betray him."

"I urged, but he refused, and only said that the girl was the daughter of a rich ranchero, and known as the Rose of Evergreen.

"That they had her at their mercy, when some one came to her rescue, a man in uniform, and he had to fly for his life, as the rescuer killed his pardons.

"As he rode away, the girl, who was a dead shot, fired at him, three of the bullets striking him, and the others passing near.

"He had ridden hard, then halted to dress his wounds, and roamed about waiting for night, when he could go to his home, but grew so weak he fell from his saddle.

"That was all I could get from him, and soon after he grew too weak to say more.

"As he had urged me to tie him to his saddle and let his horse take him home, I decided to do so, and when he died I cut some sticks and bound him to his horse as you no doubt have discovered.

"Turning the animal loose, he took the trail in this direction, and shortly after I followed, for I came down this way upon a trail I am anxious to see the end of."

Such was Buffalo Bill's story, and, having heard it, Lieutenant Willis made up his mind as to his plan of action.

CHAPTER XIX

A DEAD SECRET.

For some minutes after the scout had finished speaking not a word was spoken between the two, both seeming busy with their own thoughts.

The lieutenant was the first to break the silence, and he said:

"I have a story to tell you, Cody."

"Well, sir, you will find me a ready listener."

"I wish to tell you what I know, and, putting it with yours, of what the kidnaper told you, we will find no difficulty in making it complete."

Then Lieutenant Willis told his story of starting over to see Taylor Travis, to put in the day he would have to wait in Herders' Ranch, and the scene he became an actor in.

"Then, sir, the young lady did really kill the man?"

"Yes, and it is a pity, for her sake."

"So I think, Lieutenant Willis."

"I have heard of her, for the scouts have seen her and say she is very beautiful, and everybody loves her."

"She is a dandy rider and shot, too, they said, and is a piano which her father brought out in a spring wagon for her, while she sings like a bird."

"Of course, I took it all in as a case of 'clear gone' the boys' part, as I did not expect to find such an accomplished and lovely personage out in these wilds and live in a fort."

"They have not overpraised her, Bill, for she is all they told you, and more; but I believe she is mortgaged her property to that dashing young ranchero, who will make her a good husband."

"I don't believe it, lieutenant, for, handsome as he is, educated and rich, he takes too much pleasure in my company, and a man such as he should ascend, not downward."

"You do not like him, Bill."

"Oh, I think he's brave, for I've seen him tried; in fact, he has killed several men about Herders' Ranch in a very plucky stand-up-to-it way, I have been told; I don't trust him, sir."

"You are a good reader of human nature, I know, I see nothing in Travis other than a handsome, generous-hearted fellow, a trifle wild, perhaps, and a blunderer, while I know that he has seen several personal encounters that were forced upon him, and also enables a great deal."

Well, sir, I may be wrong, but I have no faith in him, and would dislike any lady I was interested in to marry much for him; but now, sir, what about this Rose Evergreen killing the outlaw?"

"That is just what I wished to speak to you about, sir."

"I hope she will not have to know it, sir."

"That is just the point, for I am sure it would hurt deeply."

"Nobody knows that she killed him?"

"Except you and me."

"We need not tell."

"That is what I think, Cody."

"You can take the man on with you into Herders' Ranch and say that you found him dead on the trail." "As I did."

"It will be simply put down as somebody having killed and robbed him, and he will not be connected

with the man who escaped from the attack upon Miss Reeves."

"Bill, that is the way we will have it."

"Of course, I will report it as it was to Colonel Kane, so that he will know the truth if it has to come out some day; but I told you of her sympathy with that dying youth, and if she knew that she had killed this man she would be deeply pained."

"She shot to kill, sir, for three of her shots hit him, and the others did not miss very far, but that was under the influence of the moment, and now she would, as you say, sorrow over having taken the life of even such a man, and one who attempted to harm her."

"I know how it is myself, when I have been forced to pull trigger on a human being."

"You are right, Bill, and having taken a human life it is too great a burden to shoulder upon a young girl, where it can be avoided, and so we'll keep silent upon the subject."

"Yes, sir, it shall be as a dead secret."

"That is just it."

"You know, sir, that I am working in secret."

"Very true."

"It was on this account I did not carry the body to the ranch, for I did not wish to be known."

"I had no means with me for burying it, save with my knife as a spade, and that is slow work when one is in a hurry, so I put the man on his horse as you saw, hoping the animal would take him where he lived."

"Would that not be the best way of getting at the fact of who the man really is, by tracking him to his home?"

"I have thought of that, sir, but then it would simply let the young lady know that she had killed the man."

"True."

"And as he is dead, it would serve no cause that would amount to anything."

"No, sir; you had better take him on with you to the Ranch, and the sooner he is in his grave the better."

"You are right, and the cause of his death, as you said, remains a dead secret; but now, Bill, tell me what it is that brought you here, when I thought you were forty miles west of here?"

"I will tell you, sir, the trail that I am on," replied Buffalo Bill.

CHAPTER XX.

STILL IN HIDING.

"I'll tell you, sir, just why I am here," continued Buffalo Bill. "I am following a trail."

"What kind of a trail?"

"I am anxious to find that out, sir, for I went again to the grave on the river early this morning, and I saw that it had been visited by some one since I was last there."

"The man in black again, doubtless."

"Yes, sir; so I believed."

"You know that I placed things so about the grave that I could tell if any one went there again."

"Yes."

"I arranged for any one who went on foot."

"I remember."

"But this time the visitor was on horseback, and I, of course, had no difficulty in placing him."

"Well, Bill, you tracked him, of course?"

"I am still tracking him, sir."

"The man was there not very long before I was, and he rode a large horse, iron shod, not a pony."

"I followed the trail for a mile on foot, saw that it came in this direction, so I returned to my camp and, giving one of my horses a long rope that would give him grass enough for a couple of days, and a chance to reach the brook for water, I mounted Pard here and returned to the trail."

"I followed it without difficulty except at certain places, and it led me right toward the ranch country here."

"About three o'clock this afternoon I suddenly came upon this, evidently dropped upon the trail."

Buffalo Bill handed something to the lieutenant, who quickly said:

"It is a mask."

"Yes, sir, a black one, just the kind Ned Nordeck described as being worn by the man in black."

"This grows interesting, Bill."

"All along I had the idea that I must be on the trail of the Masked Man in Black, as I did not know who else knew of the grave or would visit it."

"Then, too, the visitor had shaped up the mound a little better than I did, and straightened the post, so that naturally led me to the belief that it could be no other than the Masked Man in Black."

"It would look so, as who else would take such an interest in it?"

"No one, sir."

"The finding of the mask, which had been dropped, for one of the strings had been broken, put the idea into my mind that the slayer of Dr. Drayton was some rancher."

"Some one who had a home here among the ranches, but while waiting for the coming of the man he was to fight a duel with, had camped up near the grave he had dug for him."

"It would seem so."

"His secret camp I could not find, for he went to and from it afoot."

"After the duel he doubtless returned to his ranch, mounted his horse, and rode back to see if the grave was all right, knowing that I had been tampering with it for so long a time."

"He had come along the stage trail, and from the direction of Herders' Camp, that the tracks plainly

showed, but he came back the way I have followed him."

"And have you tracked him anywhere yet?"

"No, sir; I was still trailing him when I saw the kidnaper coming, and that delayed me until after nightfall."

"Now, my plan is to return to the hills where I met the kidnaper, and camp for the rest of the night, and ask you to delay your return to the fort to-morrow, writing the colonel by Ned Nordeck your reasons, and for you to ride out here to-morrow afternoon and meet me."

"I will do so, Bill."

"You see, sir, I do not wish to be seen by any one and as I am, I would be recognized."

"You certainly would."

"So please bring me a disguise of some kind; Jack Tobin can fit me up with one, and I will follow that trail where it leads."

"Of course, nothing can be done to the man in black whoever he may turn out to be, for it was a square-jawed fellow, fought a duel, as far as he knew; but the colonel wished to find out who he is, you told me, and we can make the try."

"We will, Bill."

"Then, too, he may prove to be none other than Captain Cobra, and Captain Cobra may be discovered to be a ranchero."

"You do certainly get at a matter from every side, Bill."

"Have to, sir, to get there."

"But there is one thing more I wish to ask you to do for me."

"Certainly."

"The Masked Man in Black was called Tyler Tatnall by the man he killed."

"That was the name."

"Please find out from Tobin if there is such a rancher or settler about Herders' Ranch, or if he ever delivered a letter through the post office to one of the names."

"A good idea, Bill, and I will do so."

"Then, sir, I will leave you now, but let me first take the props away from this dead man, and tie him differently upon the saddle, for it would not be supposed that you would rig him up this way."

This was done, and with his weird companion Lieutenant Willis started on for Herders' Ranch, where Buffalo Bill returned to the hills, to go into camp the balance of the night.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MEETING IN THE TIMBER.

It was one o'clock before Lieutenant Willis reached Herders' Ranch, and he rode into the stable of the Steepwell tavern unseen by any one.

Sending a man in for Jack Tobin, he told him

the day's adventures, meeting Cody, and what he had decided to do to help the scout on his trail, but he did not tell him that the man had fallen under the deadly aim of the Rose of Evergreen.

"Your horse was killed under me, Tobin, and I brought this one, that fell to me as one that belonged to the kidnapers, and will pay you what difference you deem just."

"Why, lieutenant, a fair exchange is no robbery, and this is about as good a horse as the one you rode away, though that is saying a great deal, as horseflesh goes, but bless her sweet soul, I would lose any horse I own to have saved that sweet girl, the Rose of Evergreen; so we are even."

The two now entered Jack Tobin's private rooms, the body of the kidnaper being left in the stable until daylight, and the landlord continued:

"Now to disguise Cody, for he is not easily disguised."

"No, but we can fit him up in some way."

"Yes, I can rig him out in a suit of corduroys, send him some hairpins to tuck his long hair up under a black slouch hat I have here, and a razor for him to shave off his mustache and imperial if he wishes to, with an outfit of books, which were left here by a book agent who was killed for lying some two years ago, having said in one day that he was a Jew, Methodist, Catholic and infidel, for he belonged to any creed the man did he wished to sell his books to."

"And some one killed him?"

"Yes, one of the boys played it on him under different disguises, pretending to be several different persons, and a row followed and the book agent was killed, the first case on record, I believe."

Jack Tobin then brought out the book agent's outfit and other things, and finding that he could carry Buffalo Bill a fairly good disguise, Lieutenant Willis bundled all up together and decided to go out after an early breakfast to meet the scout, as he had in view making another visit before his return to Herders' ranch.

When the coach came into the ranch the lieutenant as up, had had his breakfast and gave Ned Nordeck his letter to Colonel Kane.

"I'm sorry you are not goin' back with me, sir, but then you will, I guesses, next time, and I has company this time, as you sees," said Ned, alluding to several men in miner garb who were going on in the coach to the mines up about Santa Fe.

The news that Lieutenant Willis had found a dead man on the trail, in returning from Taylor Travis' ranch, and brought the body in with him, did not create more than a ripple of excitement in Herders' ranch, few going to see who he was and recognizing him as a cowboy upon one of the small ranches.

It was at once put down that he had been murdered and robbed, and he had been quietly buried in the graveyard of the ranch, which, as some of the boys

said, was running a close record for numbers in inhabitants, "Last trail," as the cemetery was called, having very few less bodies than Herders' ranch had souls in it.

Mounting another fine horse furnished him by Jack Tobin, the lieutenant set out for the place where he was to meet Buffalo Bill, carrying the scout's bundle with him.

He rode at an easy canter, and the good horse cast the miles behind him without the slightest fatigue to himself.

He passed the spot where he had left Buffalo Bill the night before, then turned off to the left for the hills, and in half an hour had entered the dense woodlands.

He had not ridden very far before he gave a hail, for his arrangement had been to meet the scout later in the day and at the edge of the timber.

His hail was at once answered from a few hundred yards away, and he recognized the scout's well-known voice.

Then he turned out of the trail he was following and soon came in sight of Buffalo Bill coming toward him.

The scout was on foot, and as he drew near called out:

"I'm mighty glad to see you, sir, for I was just going to put this note on a stick in the trail, hoping you would see it when you came this afternoon."

"You have made a discovery, then?"

"Yes, sir; and one that I intended to take advantage of, so I was going to leave."

"I had simply written here for you, knowing you would understand it:

"Was compelled to go toward T.— Will see you when you go back to T.—"

"I signed no name, in case another found it before you came, and I was mighty glad to hear you hail, for now you are here I can tell you what has happened and what I intended to do."

Lieutenant Willis felt sure that something of importance had occurred, and, following the scout through the woods, he soon came to where he had passed the night, and started as he beheld a man lying upon the ground, and apparently dead.

CHAPTER XXII.

A FIGHT IN THE DARK.

Lieutenant Willis saw that the man lying upon the ground was a Mexican.

He was large in stature, and had a bearded face and short-cropped hair.

He was dressed like a Texas cowboy, and a belt of arms and a rifle lay near him.

Staked out near Buffalo Bill's horse was an animal above the mustang size, long-limbed, gaunt-bodied, and with every indication of strength, speed, and endurance.

Hanging upon a limb near was a Mexican saddle, bridle and lasso.

That he was dead a closer look revealed to the officer, and more, he saw no fewer than four wounds upon the man.

"Who is he, Bill?"

In response the scout handed the lieutenant a note, saying:

"It is in Spanish, sir, and I read it but indifferently."

The officer took the note, which was in an unsealed envelope, and addressed simply in Spanish:

"TO RATTLE,

"BY VIPER."

Opening it, the lieutenant read, also in Spanish:

"The bearer, Viper, is a new man, but to be trusted.

"After getting the stores from C——, put them in the cliff cavern, and disperse, until a call from

"COBRA.

"P. S.—Viper will bring me word of success or failure."

"Well, Bill, I think I see something in this, but you doubtless read between the lines far better than I do, so what do you make of it?"

"Just this, sir.

"I have heard that, like Captain Cobra, all of his men are named after some reptile.

"Now, Rattle stands, in my opinion, for Rattlesnake, and he is doubtless the leader in charge of some act of outlawry.

"Viper is plain, and he is a new man, but is to be trusted, and he is to bring back news of success or failure of what is to be done, to Cobra, who is no doubt Captain Cobra, and the writer of this note.

"The 'C——' must stand for coach, and the stores are what it is robbed of.

"The cliff cavern is, I think, the place where Captain Cobra hid the day I chased him so close, and which you know how I afterward discovered, but he does not know that I am aware of the secret hiding place, and he considers it a good place to put the booty."

"Bill, you have read it out as though it was so written; but how did you get the note?"

"Well, sir, I can lay it to my Death Charm, I suppose, for that fellow was a fighter.

"He came along the trail last night at a gallop, soon after I got into camp.

"I heard him some distance off, and ran to the trail to head him off, for I was sure that you were returning for some reason, or it was my Masked Man in Black.

"I halted him, knowing you would recognize my voice and answer, for it was dark in the timber.

"A savage Spanish oath and a shot followed my

challenge, and the bullet cut through my hat, a close call.

"Instantly I decided to have my man, and, leaping out into the trail, seized the bridle rein as he was dashing by.

"Then followed the closest and hottest duel of my life, and only the fact that his revolver went back on him saved me.

"He pulled trigger the moment I grasped his bridle but his cap snapped.

"My shot wounded him.

"Again his cap snapped, and my shot told.

"But he was game, and, cursing me in Spanish, he still continued to pull trigger, as I did.

"Five times the weapon missed fire, and four times my bullets hit him, for as the horse was mad with fright and I had hard work to hold him, I missed one shot."

"What a terrible and remarkable fight, Bill."

"It was the closest call and fiercest fight of my life sir, and the man was dead-game to the very last.

"My last shot brought him from the saddle, and having quieted his horse, I went to him, but he was dead.

"I brought him over to my camp, and went back for his horse.

"Then, as I did not wish to build a fire that might attract the attention of some one, I turned in for the balance of the night, to await for daylight, and needed the rest."

"What a remarkable coincidence that five of his shouts missed fire."

"Yes, sir. The first sent a bullet through my hat but the other five snapped, fortunately for me."

"Your Death Charm holds its power yet, Bill," said the officer, with a smile.

"Yes, sir, it would seem so."

"But tell me the rest of your story."

"When dawn came, sir, I saw just what my shot had done, and it is a wonder he had the strength to still fight on.

"This note he had upon him, a belt of gold about his waist, and his weapons are the very best, while the horse he rode is the very animal I tracked from the grave here," and Buffalo Bill knew that his word would surprise the lieutenant.

Lieutenant Willis had listened with the greatest attention to all the scout had to tell of his midnight adventure.

"Well, Bill, you have the most remarkable way of getting into scrapes, and the most clever manner of extricating yourself that I have ever heard of.

"But you feel very sure that the horse of this man is the same ridden from the upper country by the man you tracked and whom you regard as surely the one who killed Dr. Drayton?"

"Of the last I shall not assert positively, sir, but the horse is the same, there is no mistake there."

"You are generally on the safe side."

"You see, sir, I noted that track well, the peculiarities about it, measured all four feet, and noted the way the horse had of stepping."

"Three points I noticed at once in the tracks of this horse, when I led him to water this morning, with no idea of observing if he was the same animal I had tracked."

"Then I led him into soft ground, noted each hoof-print, and measured it, observed just how he stepped, and I am sure he is the animal."

"Then the rider must be the Man in Black?"

"I don't think that, sir, for he is a Mexican, and Ned Nordeck said the man in black spoke with no accent."

"This man cursed me in choice Spanish and English, and the latter, I observed, had a decided accent in the two or three words he uttered."

"Where do you think this man came from?"

"That I could find out, if I had time, by trailing him; but it is more important for me to go on now, and look up the men he was going to meet."

"There may be a number of them."

"True, sir; but I shall be in very little danger."

"How so?"

"I don't like much playing the part of a dead man, but I shall hunt up Rattle and pretend to be Viper."

"Bill, this risk is too desperate."

"I think not, sir, for I shall ride his horse, carry his outfit, take the note along, and play Viper for all I am worth."

"But you do not speak Spanish well enough not to betray yourself."

"That's all right, sir, for nothing is said in the note that I am a Mexican, though Rattle is doubtless one, and that is why it was written in Spanish."

"I don't like this adventure of yours a bit, Bill."

"See the results, sir, if successful."

"I shall strike the stage trail, follow it up to the scene where they attack it, for I am too late to save it. I can then track the outlaws from there to their lair and present my letter."

"I shall ride his horse, making mine the pack animal, or I can cover my saddle and bridle up in that way, and use the Mexican's."

"And do you wish me to do anything, Bill?"

"You might follow on his trail, sir, if you wish, and see just where it leads, though I really think, sir, if you don't mind the hard riding, it would be best for you to return to the ranch and send a courier through to the fort to-night, asking Colonel Kane for a dozen scouts and a score of your troop to meet you at the ford, where you can go into a secret camp and be near if I have to call upon you for aid, for I am sure that the Cobras only pretended to disband, that they might allay all fears, and then make some big haul."

"I will go through to the fort to-night myself, and get the men, for I do not mind the ride in the least," was the plucky answer of the young officer.

CHAPTER XXIII.

UNMASKING THE BLACK MASK.

Ned Nordeck, the driver, was pushing his team to their utmost capacity along the trail between Fort Taos and Herders' Ranch.

He was feeling decidedly nervous, for he had heard that the Cobra band of outlaws, which Buffalo Bill had broken up six months before, had been reorganized, and had broken out afresh in their depredations.

He knew that Buffalo Bill, who had been spending a portion of a furlough in the Southwest at the time, had been summoned to Fort Taos to start out to break up the Cobras for a second time, but he also knew that the great scout had, as yet, had but little time in which to take any steps against the outlaws.

He did not know, of course, that the great scout had fought and killed Viper, one of the outlaws, and that disguised as the dead bandit he was already following the coach.

Ned had a good deal of money in his keeping, going by express, and, to make him more nervous than ever, there was not a single passenger in the coach on this trip.

As he turned a bend in the road, he pulled his horses in suddenly, muttering to himself, "It's all up!"

Before him in the middle of the road, mounted on a black horse, sat the black mask. The man, masked and clad wholly in black, who had killed his passenger, Dr. Edgar Drayton, a short time before, and who had answered to the name of Tyler Tatnal.

"Halt," cried the Black Mask, in a harsh voice, "throw up your hands."

Ned did as he was commanded without uttering a word. He knew that words would avail him little in his present predicament.

"Step out, boys, and do your duty," cried the man in black.

At his words a number of men, apparently Mexicans from their dress and general appearance and armed to the teeth, sprang out from the bushes on either hand of the road, and started toward the coach.

"The Cobras or I'm a liar. The man in black, or the Black Mask as they call him, is the captin o' the gang."

Ned muttered these words under his breath as the Cobras, under the direction of the Black Mask who was indeed their leader, started in to rifle the coach.

Meanwhile three people, all in concealment, and two of them ignorant that the other was in the vicinity, were watching the proceedings in the middle of the trail.

One of these was Buffalo Bill, clad in the clothes

of the dead Viper. He had caught up with the coach, left his horse tethered beyond the turn of the road, and had crawled forward taking advantage of every bit of cover, and was now watching the hold-up, concealed comfortably behind a fallen tree.

From his position he could plainly see two figures peering over the bushes that fringed a cliff that bordered the trail on one side.

They were two men who had formerly been members of the outlaw bands, but who had proved traitors—Sol and Lew Nichols. Sol was the man who had been sentenced to die in the raffle of death, but, thanks to a steel plate he wore inside his shirt, and thanks to the friendliness of his executioner to whom Sol had spoken of the plate and requested that he aim for it, he had not been killed.

The executioner had fired at this plate and Sol had only been stunned, and later on, when left for dead, had taken himself off.

Since then the two brothers had vowed vengeance upon the Cobras, and watched their goings and comings carefully. Now was their chance for a shot at the leader of the outlaw band upon whom they had vowed vengeance.

Buffalo Bill knew that they were both hard characters, for he recognized them, but he could not imagine what they were doing crouched at the top of the cliff. He lay quietly behind his log and awaited developments.

Suddenly, when the Cobras had just taken their booty from the coach, the rifles of the Nichols brothers appeared over the top of the cliff, and two shots rang out.

The Black Mask rolled from his horse and fell to the ground while Sol and Lew Nichols, having accomplished their vengeance, and having no wish for a fight with the remainder of the outlaws, disappeared among the bushes.

The bandits were thrown into confusion immediately, and Ned Nordeck, thinking that a party had napped along in the nick of time to rescue them, dropped his hands upon his revolvers as quick as a flash and opened fire.

He was seated on the box of the coach and two bandits, who were standing on the ground beside the mules, fell in their tracks.

Another outlaw clambered on the roof of the coach behind Ned, and before he could turn threw him back upon the seat. A knife gleamed in his hand and was

upraised ready to plunge into the breast of the brave driver when Buffalo Bill's rifle cracked.

The Cobra fell dead and the remainder took to flight leaving their booty, their leader and their dead comrades behind them.

Buffalo Bill and Ned Nordeck found that the Black Mask was not killed immediately, but had been mortally wounded by the shots fired at him.

When the mask was taken from his face he was seen to be a handsome man, and, as he knew he was dying, he told Buffalo Bill enough of his past history to explain the mystery that had surrounded him.

He had been a Southern planter, but having been disappointed in love went West, and in a fit of desperation had joined a band of outlaws, becoming their leader.

He had vowed vengeance upon his rival in love Edgar Drayton, and had begged him to come West to fight him a duel, knowing that with his own record for outlawing it would have been impossible for him to have returned to the East without being captured.

Drayton's wife, the girl over whom he had quarreled with the Black Mask, died, and as he cared little for anything else in life he decided to go West to fight a duel with the outlaw, hoping that it might end in his own death.

The open grave had been kept empty by the Black Mask as he had vowed he would place Drayton's body there, and he finally did so, as the reader knows.

The dying man also told Buffalo Bill that he was who had hired the men to kidnap the Rose of Evergreen Ranch, hoping to secure a large ransom from the girl's relatives.

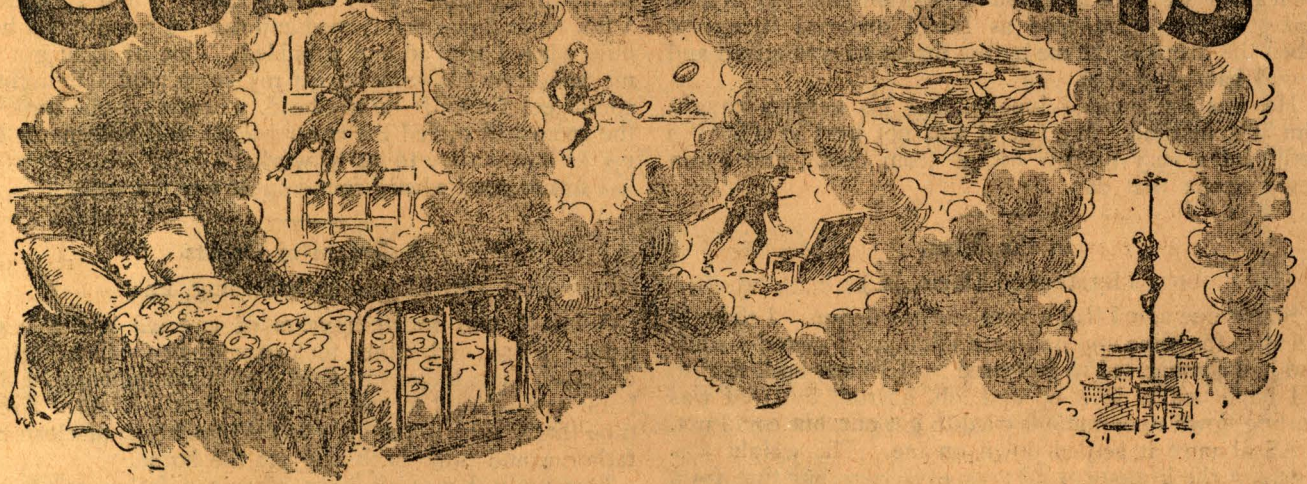
He died after making this confession, and his body and the body of the two other dead outlaws were placed in the coach and driven to Fort Taos, where Buffalo Bill was overwhelmed with congratulations over the success of his trail of the Black Mask.

THE END.

Next week's issue (No. 76) will contain "Buffalo Bill's Road-Agent Round-Up; or, Panther Pete's Revenge." This story will tell of the great scout's final attack upon the outlaws and how he ultimately wiped out the band completely.

Perhaps you have heard already of Panther Pete the strange old man who lived alone in the wilderness taming wild beasts until they would come to him at his call. You will hear more of him next week.

CURIOUS DREAMS



A corking contest is what we predicted when it opened.

That's what it is developing into.

Just read some of these curious dreams.

Just look at the prizes mentioned on page 31 and then enter the contest yourself.

A Frightful Dream.

(By Chas. Stommel, Col.)

This is the dream I had one night:

I dreamed I went upon a railroad bridge, and when I got in the middle of the bridge, I saw a train coming each way, and when I found all hope was gone of stopping the train I jumped from the bridge, a distance of 125 feet, and landed in the water and swam ashore.

When I got ashore my clothes were stiff with ice, and I was shivering with cold.

It was five miles to the nearest house.

When I got there I changed my clothes and started for home, and going home I had to go through a graveyard, and I was scared half to death.

Then I woke up and was trembling with fear.

A Narrow Escape.

(By Wm. Conway, Pa.)

I was on my way taking a walk to the river drive, and to make my way short I had to cross two large trestle bridges, which I was forbidden to do by my parents.

I disobeyed them and crossed it. I got partly over the first bridge when I saw a fast New York express train approaching.

I was bewildered and did not know what to do. I fell between the trestle and tried to hang on for dear life to the ties, but my strength failed me and I fell into the deep, muddy river below the bridge, before the train had passed me.

I was in the water for about thirty seconds. Of course I could not swim, like other boys.

Three men were standing on the shore and they heard my screams for help. They lost no time in securing a small boat and rowed out after me. I had no idea of being saved, and thought I was a goner, but I was safe in

the man's arms and they then hurried the boat back to shore.

They laid me with my face toward the ground and rubbed my head and back, and very soon they brought me to. I thanked the men for their wonderful act and told them that I could never, never pay them for what they had done.

Before leaving me they took my name and address, and then I left them, making my way for home, saying over and over to my self, "Never disobey your parents," and with that I awoke from my slumber, very much startled.

An Escaped Lunatic.

(By Joe Bauman, N. Y.)

About two months ago I was spending a week's vacation with a friend of mine by the name of Charles Mack. His age was 20 and mine 14.

We used to shoot at targets with pistols. We always had one in our pockets.

One night I dreamed that we had just started for home after we were tired of target shooting. My friend was walking about one hundred yards ahead of me. As he turned a corner and got out of sight I heard a sharp cry and a thud. I began running and as I turned the corner I was horror struck to see a man standing over the apparently lifeless body of my friend.

He had a big knife in his hand. I did not know whether it was best to run or stay. All at once I thought of my pistol. I got it pretty quick and shot at and shattered the hand that held the knife.

Instantly the man turned, and with a wild laugh caught me by the throat before I could shoot again. In the midst of it all I awoke, with the perspiration pouring down my face.

In the morning I told the whole family my dream, and they all laughed.

That afternoon we went target-shooting. When we went home we were in the same position as in my dream, and everything happened as I had dreamed it, except when the man caught me by the throat he was seized and bound hand and foot.

He was an escaped lunatic, and his keepers caught him just in time. My friend was not hurt at all. We both had a very narrow escape from death, and I can never forget that day.

In the Mine.

(By Walton Davis, Ia.)

Some time ago I had a very curious dream. I thought I was in the mine and had been mining. I mined a while and had commenced to feel tired, so I leaned back to rest.

I happened to look up and, oh, horror! the roof was settling down upon me. I tried to get out, but could not.

All at once it settled down on me. The weight was crushing the life out of me; my eyes were bursting from their sockets and I was panting for breath. I thought of all my past life and knew I would soon be dead, when I at last awoke with a start and, oh, joy! it was only a dream.

A Redskin Dream.

(By John Prior, Tenn.)

One night it was very cold and I went to bed. I had a dream of going out hunting and I ran across five Indians in the forest. They saw me and shot one arrow at me, striking me in the left arm, but not doing much damage. I had a rifle, a knife and two revolvers.

When they shot I was too scared to move, but after regaining my self-possession I raised my rifle and fired and killed one, but before I had time to shoot again they were upon me.

I drew my knife and hit one in the breast with it, not hurting him much. One of them hit me with a club and put me out of business.

When I regained consciousness from the blow, I was bound hand and feet, on top of a pony, and my head felt as if it was about to split. Blood was on my shirt from the wound. They led me on for about eight miles and we went down into a valley, called Indian Village.

They took me off the pony and laid me on the ground and untied my hands and stretched them out; nailed stakes at the end of hands and tied them there, and treated my feet the same way. The children and the old people came and spit in my face and kicked me, and made fun of me.

When night came they put my blanket around me and left me there half of the night.

I tried to get loose, but it was no use, and I fell asleep. When I woke they were standing around me, one of them with a torch in his hand, and then a big Indian came and told me that they were going to let me loose if I could run through a file of them without getting knocked down. They untied me, took me out in the field and each Indian had a club. They made a row and put me at the head of it, and told me to run through.

They had taken all of my arms except one pistol, and I stepped back a few feet and saw my chance. When I got to the first Indian I snatched my pistol and hit him

on the head, knocking him down, and at the same time I snatched his club. They all got after me and I knocked a few more down and turned and ran. I ran about a half mile when I tripped and stumbled. One of them got on me and drew his knife to get my scalp, and I thought I could feel the knife on my head, when some one came in the room and pulled the cover off me and told me to get up, as it was time to go to work.

I felt so good when I found out it was not true.

A Dream of Ghosts.

(By Chester E. Browning, Pa.)

When I was fourteen years of age we had a horse named Flora; and father took care of her. One night I dreamed that father died. I had to take care of the horse and be kind to her and do the best I could. Every time that I went to the barn to feed the horse or clean her father would come back and pet the horse.

One night I was cleaning her when father came and said to me, "Take good care of Flora," and he disappeared in the darkness.

When I came out of the barn to go to the house, there were three ghosts sitting by the side of the barn, and father was with them.

I went down to the house and got the lantern and went up to the barn, and they had disappeared. When I woke up I was lying in one corner of the room. This was a curious dream.

LETTERS FROM PRIZE WINNERS.

PHILADELPHIA, Sept. 16, 1902.

GENTLEMEN:—I received the prize all O. K. and am very much pleased with it. I did not expect to receive anything for my efforts, so I have been very agreeably surprised.

Don't you think I have started very well? Please let me know if this letter will be published. I am a constant reader of BUFFALO BILL WEEKLY, and am personally acquainted with Mr. Cody. Yours very truly,

JOS. W. BOND.

You bet you've started well, Joseph. Glad you like the prize. Get into the new contest.

DEAR SIR:—I wish to thank you for the fishing outfit. It is a peach. I will thank you now. I hope my next story will win something. I have had an offer of \$6 for the fishing outfit, but I won't sell.

THOMAS KLINE.

CORRESPONDENCE.

R. M. F.—All the names you mention are those of real characters, now living.

 \$1 worth of Tricks & Make-ups sent postpaid for 25 cents stamps or 50¢ silver. A nice Moustache or full Beard, Irish or Side Whiskers, any color, bottle of Eye Drops to stick them on. Box of Biscuits, Cork to blacken up, the Rubber Mouth, big teeth, secret & apparatus for performing the great vanishing half-dollar trick. This big offer is to get your address to send my large list, out of plays, wise tricks & acts, latest novelties. Send me paper you saw this in and I will also put in a Heavy GOLD plate paper King FREE, send also. Address Chas. Marshall, Mfr., Lockport, N.Y.

HERE'S A NEW CONTEST! A CORKER!

The Contest just starting is going to be the greatest we ever ran. It's an entirely new idea. The Prizes are new and the finest we ever offered. The other contests held in the **BUFFALO BILL WEEKLY** have all made splendid success, but this one is sure to break all records. Why? Because it is a brand-new idea—a contest every boy in America has an equal chance in, and because the prizes beat anything ever offered before. All you have to do is to write out an account of any of your

Curious Dreams.

Everybody has had remarkable dreams, and anybody who sends in an account of one has a chance of winning one of the prizes. They consist of

THREE FIRST-CLASS PHOTOGRAPHIC OUTFITS,

Including Camera and all Appliances for Taking and Developing Photographs.

Five Hunting Axes and Five Hunting Knives.

Think of the fun you can have this winter with one of those cameras. You can take and develop photographs of all your friends. Full directions go with each camera. Think how useful and handy a first-rate hunting knife or ax will be when you go hunting or trapping in the woods this winter.

To Win a Prize.—Write an account of any curious or remarkable dream you have had—no matter what it was about. Tell it in five hundred words, and send it with the coupon you will find on this page, properly filled out, to the **BUFFALO BILL WEEKLY**, care of Street & Smith, 238 William St., New York City.

HERE IS A LIST OF THE PRIZES:

The three boys who send in the three most interesting accounts will each receive an **Eastman Pocket Kodak**, with complete outfit. The camera takes picture 1½x2 inches; uses film, and has capacity for twelve pictures without reloading; weight six ounces. This wonderful little camera takes pictures equal to the most expensive. It makes negatives of such sharpness and definition that beautiful enlargements of any size can be made from them. Has perfect Achromatic Lens of fixed focus, Rotary Shutter, with sets of three stops, square View Finder, and covered with fine Seal Grain Leather. Takes snap shots or time exposures. Easily carried in pocket or on bicycle. Complete with roll of film for twelve exposures and Leather Carrying Case, with room for three extra film cartridges.

The five boys who send in the five next best accounts will each receive a **Safety Hunting Ax**. Dimensions over all 11x4 inches; weight 18 ounces. The blade is made of solid tool steel, finely tempered and highly polished. The handle is made of mild steel, nickel plated on copper, with handle plates of engraved hard rubber. The guard is of sheet steel, hinged on a spring in such a manner that either open or closed it is firmly held in position. The construction is unique

and of such a nature as to make it almost impossible for one part to become detached from another. The head has an oblong semi-circular recess milled in either side to receive the slotted end of handle, which is accurately milled to a close fit and firmly held by a ¼-inch steel screw. This method of handle fastening prevents any liability of the blade working loose on the handle. The upper part of the handle is slotted on the under side to receive the folded sheet steel guard, which is so arranged as to be firmly held by a flat steel bar when open or closed.

The five boys who send in the five next best accounts will each receive a **Sportsman's Ideal Hunting Knife**. There is about as much difference in point of utility and beauty between one of our "Ideal" hunting knives and any other knife on the market as there is between a grizzly bear and a porcupine. They are hand forged, hand tempered, hand tested by the rigidest possible test and finished in a manner that makes them the handsomest knives in the market. The "Ideal" knives are made with 5-inch blades, leather handle, brass and fibre trimmings, with polished stag-horn tip. A handsome black or russet case with each knife.

Now, Boys, You See Your Chance!

It's Up to You to Win a Prize!

COUPON.

BUFFALO BILL DREAM CONTEST.

Street and No.
City or Town.
State.
Title of Story.

This Contest closes **December 1st**. All entries must be in by that date.

Remember, the "**BUFFALO BILL WEEKLY**" has the greatest circulation of any weekly descriptive of Indian warfare ever published. Your story, whether it wins a prize or not, has a chance of being published, and will be read throughout the length and breadth of the Continent.

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